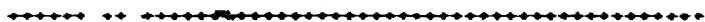


AMPHIBIAN



A . ECONSIDERATION  
OF BROWNING



# THE BROWN SOUTHERN

This is the first of a series of four books, each of which  
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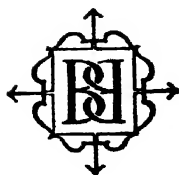
# AMPHIBIAN



A RECONSIDERATION OF  
BROWNING



HENRY CHARLES DUFFIN



BOWES & BOWES

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TO MY WIFE  
who from the very beginning  
• has shared with me  
a delight in Browning

This book is a survey  
as well as an estimate. I do not see how  
the estimate could have been made  
without the survey



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## FOREWORD

I OWE a considerable debt to Browning, and have taken what he (if he is still growling at critics) must regard as an odd way of repaying it. Browning, more than anyone except my wife, made my life the excellent thing it has been. The chance impact of a volume of Browning selections, at the age of eighteen and a half, diverted me from drudgery to joy, from a prospective degree in Science to an Arts course, and English honours at that, sending me to work under C. H. Herford ('the most accomplished English scholar of his age', the *Dictionary of National Biography* calls him), who, though an uninspiring teacher, lured me by faint praise to twelve hours reading a day and developed the seed of a life-long passion for poetry.

My University course did not include, in any great detail, the Victorians, and it was only after I had come down that I read Herford's *Browning* (a better book than his *Wordsworth*, I think) and gleefully wrote to draw his attention to a mixed metaphor I had discovered in his pages: 'Some poor crushed and writhing worm, like the girl in the *Confessional*, utters its long-drawn shriek of futile rage.' He was a bit snooty about it, and said text-book rules did not apply to University Professors (or words to that effect), but I still think it a comical lapse, though not so funny as the misquotation (possibly intended) in the first edition of Herbert Read's *Wordsworth*:

• A perfect woman, nobly planned

To WARM, to comfort and command.

In the lucid intervals of 'work' I took Browning in great gobbets, and read a paper on him to the University Literary Society. Herbert MacLachlan, afterwards Principal of the Unitarian College, was in the chair, and I remember his deprecation of the idea—mine and Browning's—that God's chief attribute was love. Since that distant day Browning has been much overshadowed in my mind by Wordsworth, but I do not forget that it was he who first opened to me what I have elsewhere called 'the way'.

I take some satisfaction in offering for frontispiece, instead of one of the well-known portraits, a reproduction of Browning's *Andromeda*, to which a small story attaches. I knew it was impossible to come at the original painting, as Mrs Orr says this was done on a wall in Rome which long ago fell down. No 'Browning expert' could tell me what had become of the engraving

which he kept on his desk, and the art authorities to whom I wrote knew nothing of the existence of any such engraving, and assured me there was no trace of a *Perseus and Andromeda* in the 'lives and works' of Polidoro. Knowing that at Baylor University, Waco, Texas, there was a great Browning Library, I wrote to its Head and creator, Professor A. J. Armstrong, and received by return the information that the engraving I was looking for was in the Print Room of the British Museum! It does seem to me queer that I should have had to go to Texas to find this out, and I here express my obligation to Professor Armstrong for so readily putting at my disposal his Browning omniscience.

## PART I : THE MAN

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THERE CAN BE few people alive to-day who knew Browning before he died in 1889. One such is Bertrand Russell, who tells us (in *Unpopular Essays*) that he 'met him frequently in the last years of his life, and found nothing in him to command reverence. He was a pleasant, kindly old gentleman, very much at home at tea-parties of middle-aged ladies, dapper, suave, and thoroughly domesticated, but without the divine fire one expects of a poet.' I cannot feel that this wise man and brilliant thinker has been helped to a critical understanding of Browning by the recollection of this experience, and the observations may stand, in their complete irrelevance, for much that is written about the 'lives' of poets. Many people are incapacitated from appreciating Wordsworth's poetry by knowing too much about his life. An artist seldom shows genius in two directions, and if we find that a man who moves through the world of his art like a god goes stumbling gracelessly through the world of affairs, we ought not to be surprised, or to lessen our admiration for that activity in which he was truly great. Light may be thrown on the 'meaning' of a poem here and there by reference to something in the poet's life, but the 'meaning' will be the non-universal one. Having been moved by the line, 'Let the great world spin for ever down the ringing grooves of change', do we need, are we grateful for, are we much enlightened by, the information that 'when Tennyson travelled by the first train from Liverpool to Manchester he thought the wheels ran in a groove'? We are probably in a position to judge a poet best when we know nothing about his life. Hence it is not my intention to deal with Browning's life, which has moreover been adequately chronicled by Mrs Orr and Messrs Griffin and Minchin.

This view is not universally held, and Browning himself may be quoted against me. In the *Essay on Shelley* he declares we must know the life of a poet before we can decide whether his inspiration is genuine, because his poetry is an effluence from his personality. This led him to an undue depreciation of Shelley's poetry when, some years later, he thought he had got a little more knowledge of his life. In any case it is the personality we are after, so I content myself with a sketch of Browning's personality. Before going on to examine his poetry I should like to put down how I see the man who wrote that poetry, and

since a man in love is that man at his best I start with Browning as a lover, then show what kind of man he was in other relationships, and finally see what can be found, from his letters and conversations, of his views and outlook, philosophy and religion.

## I. THE LOVER

The reader, especially if he is under forty, will already have decided that I have chosen an unfortunate starting point in 'the Wimpole Street legend'. Miss Naomi Lewis says the one complaint the moderns have against Browning is that he was monogamous. Nevertheless even the most modern young man has at some time, however briefly, an expectation of monogamy—in other words, falls in love for the first time—and it would do much to promote the happiness of women if somehow it could become compulsory or customary for every man intending marriage to read the two volumes of *The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett*. For here, as nowhere else, a man of high character and talent, the beauty of his personality heightened by the nature of his love, takes the opportunity to write himself and his love out completely, presenting a perfect model of behaviour for the male lover. Here, for the first time, two lovers, both great of soul and with supreme literary gifts, are concerned to say completely what they feel about each other, the outcome being a handbook of love which has no rival. The unique feature, and one not likely to be repeated, is that both lovers were great, and equal in greatness, and brilliant in their power of expression. Dorothy Osborne's letters are quite lovely in themselves, but not only do we lack Temple's replies but if we had them they would fall short of hers because he was morally her inferior. For the unrestrained expression of tenderness by genius, again only on one side, we may turn to the *Journal to Stella*: but abnormality of circumstances, and perhaps of feeling, rules out Swift as an example for imitation. Even in the passionate, tragic letters of Héloïse and Abélard one feels that the torn and troubled figure of the schoolman is not quite worthy of the shining heroism of the woman who loved him. In fact, to get anything approximating to a parallel to the Browning letters we must pass out of nature into art, and read the Shaw-Terry correspondence.

Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett were two great and kindred spirits. Each had long known and admired the other's poetry. Hers suffers much from disesteem to-day, but the soul of a richly-gifted and



tender-hearted woman speaks through it, and when Browning found, in 1845, from a stanza in her latest volume, that she knew his poetry and appreciated, as few did, its warm-blooded humanity, he wrote, 'I love your verses with all my heart, dear Miss Barrett . . . the fresh strange music, the affluent language, the exquisite pathos and true new brave thought . . . and I love you too'.

Browning was at this moment thirty-two, and (apart from the words he had just used) entirely whole of heart. This does not mean he had not known love, but the love he had known had not been—as it so easily might have been with almost any other man in his thirties—of a kind that could spoil a perfect marriage. He had gazed in adoration at Polidoro's Andromeda; he had given a boy's sweet love to his beautiful and virtuous friend, Eliza Flower, ten years his elder; he had been ravished by the airy but not unreal passions of Shelley. He was indeed in the state so wonderfully described by Augustine in the words which stand at the head of *Alastor*: *Nondum amabam, et amare amabam, quaerebam quid amarem, amans amare*.

An exalted and exalting admiration is the characteristic note of the correspondence and relationship thus initiated, and admiration makes the most enduring basis for love. It was easy, perhaps, for these two, both being of such rare quality, to admire each other, but (lest the phrase, 'mutual admiration society' should seem to be looming in sight) admiration induced on both sides a profound and beautiful humility. They were so modest in their feeling, each seeing the other's love as a transcendental fairy-tale. 'What are you given me for', he writes, 'but to make me better, and in that happier? . . . to give me the chance of becoming more like you and worthier you?'—while she comforts herself that as far as she can she understands him, divines him, 'calls him by his right name'. 'It is something to be able to look at life as you look at it'—though we may find that as the years went on he took more from her than she from him. Meanwhile he declares he could never have loved a woman he could not look up to in intellect as well as goodness. For her goodness, after years of marriage Browning said of his wife that she 'could impute evil to no one': and I suppose there is no more severe test. (It is perhaps desirable to add, since perfection is widely regarded as unlikeable, that at least once, in a letter written after her marriage, she seems to me not quite to pass the test—but Robert and Elizabeth made a point of not reading each other's letters.)

There was never a more obvious case of a miracle achieved through

faith than the swift improvement in Elizabeth's health. The risk Browning took was enormous, but he knew what he was doing, and how he was doing it. 'How strong you make me, you who make me happy!' she writes. There are still head-waggers who declare the strength was artificially maintained, over-estimated and abused, and so lasting 'only fifteen years'. Now Elizabeth was the elder by six years, and it is perhaps one of the miraculous elements in the story that she died before there could be any widening of the discrepancy. Pitifully short as it was, there is a lyric shape about fifteen years of perfect happiness. (Remember, too, that she said, when she was forty-seven, 'The rust of time, the touch of age, is hideously revolting to me'.) At the other end of the story one may see a further hint of marvel in Browning's boyhood fascination by the myth of Perseus and Andromeda, the innocent victim and the divine deliverer: a picture of the rescue, chosen from his father's collection, was always before him in his study as he wrote. And as a reminder that the quality of wonder was continuously there we have the incident of the 'sortes', described with such feeling and humour by Browning in his letter of 11th February 1846:

I have got a reassurance—you asked me once if I were superstitious, I remember (as what do I forget that you say?). However that may be, yesterday morning as I turned to look for a book, an old fancy seized me to try the 'sortes' and dip into the first page of the first I chanced upon, for my fortune; I said 'what will be the event of my love for Her'—in so many words—and my book turned out to be—'Cecutti's Italian Grammar'!—a propitious source of information . . . the best to be hoped, what could it prove but some assurance that you were in the Dative Case, or I, not in the ablative absolute? I do protest that, with the knowledge of so many horrible pitfalls, or rather spring guns with wires on every bush . . . such dreadful possibilities of stumbling on 'conditional moods', 'imperfect tenses', 'singular numbers',—I should have been too glad to put up with the safe spot for the sole of my foot though no larger than afforded by such a word as 'Conjunction', 'possessive pronoun—', secure so far from poor Tippet's catastrophe. Well, I ventured, and what did I find? *This*—which I copy from the book now—'*If we love in the other world as we do in this, I shall love thee to eternity*'—from 'Promiscuous Exercises,' to be translated into Italian, at the end.

To me, one of the strangest things about this astonishing correspondence is the realization that it formed only one strand in the sixteen months' intimacy: it is complete in itself, and yet there was going on all the time a series of personal meetings, two or three a week, at which, so it seems, the lovers talked of an entirely different set of subjects from those which occupy them in the letters. The letters very seldom refer to anything which had occurred in conversation, and a letter written on Wednesday replies to one written on Monday just as if no meeting had taken place on the intervening Tuesday.

And since we know what tragic, well-intentioned destruction has come to other precious personal documents, I count for another miracle the humanity and good sense of Browning, and of his son after him, that the *Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett*, 1845-1846, were preserved for the reverence and delight of all lovers of genius in love. Some sensitive people find them embarrassing (in a striking sonnet Mary Winter Wren says she suddenly felt the gaze of 'four reproachful eyes'), but the brilliant adequacy of the style obviates this: every feeling and thought in the world can be put down, and read, without offence if it be done with style.

One must not perhaps call it a miracle—at all events it is a miracle that has operated, in varying degrees, in many lesser cases—that love raised the epistolary powers of these two poets to a level with their poetic genius. This shows itself most strikingly with Browning. Elizabeth had always been, and continued to be, an easy and luminous letter-writer, but what letters we have of Browning before 1845 are undistinguished; for example, his letters to W. J. Fox, who saw genius in *Pauline* and *Paracelsus*, are awkward and pretentious, with a heavy-handed humour for which he has to apologize—'Excuse all this swagger'. In later years he improved greatly, but seldom rose much above the very moderate excellence of Wordsworth, say: he was not naturally a letter-writer of genius, like Lamb and T. E. Lawrence; and like other great talkers he disliked letter-writing. (But by his love for Elizabeth he was inspired to write hundreds of letters almost every one of which was a prose-poem. Chesterton and others have pronounced them obscure, and occasionally a passage taken out of its context presents momentary difficulties, but read in continuity these letters are crammed with fascinating matter in molten prose. They must indeed—especially his—have been written at white-heat and top-speed, but the coursing sentences, however long, are always grammatically sound, and perfectly

lucid if read with the intensity of attention with which they were composed. How little change would be needed to make impassioned verse of this:

My life is bound up with yours—my own, first and last love. What wonder if I feared to tire you—I who, knowing you as I do, admiring what is so admirable (let me speak), loving what must needs be loved, fain to learn what you only can teach; proud of so much, happy in so much of you; I, who, for all this, neither come to admire, nor feel proud, nor be taught—but only, only to live with you and be by you—that is love—for I *know* the rest, as I say. I know those qualities are in you . . . but at them I could get in so many ways . . . I have your books, here are my letters you give me; you would answer my questions were I in Pisa—well, and it all would amount to nothing, infinitely much as I know it is; to nothing if I could not sit by you and see you . . . I can stop at that, but not before. [Oct. 13, 1845.]

Leaving her on 30th April 1846 he sits down next day to write a letter like a heart-beat, brief but too long to quote, ending:

All which I take up the paper determining *not* to write—for it is foolish, poor endeavour at best, but—just this time it is written. May God bless you. R.B.

Both Robert and Elizabeth burst into love-letters as a child into tears or a spring wood into daffodils—at this time it seems their natural mode of expression. Having been married at 11.15 a.m., at 1 p.m. he, at 4.30 p.m. she, pour out their feelings on past, present and to come, though 'Words', he says, 'can never tell you . . . how perfectly dear you are to me—perfectly dear to my heart and soul. I look back, and in every one point, every word and gesture, every letter, every silence—you have been entirely perfect to me. I would not change one word, one look.'

(Browning was demonstrably in love, but other men have been in love and yet proved very unsatisfactory lovers. I have suggested that Browning was the perfect lover. For this it was necessary that he should shed all male egoism and replace it by consideration for the beloved. This is the very spirit of the letters.) Early in the correspondence

he writes, 'I would rather go without your letters, without seeing you at all, if that advantaged you', and towards the end, when she hints that the frequency of his visits may cause suspicion, he unhesitatingly replies that though he 'lives for their meetings he will reduce them, putting first things first. Other signs of this attitude will come along, but at the moment I want to suggest that even his occasional lapses from the ideal emphasize its validity. It did not, for instance, prevent him from arguing obstinately on questions on which they differed; this occurred only twice, both times Browning being plainly in the wrong and hopelessly out-argued—on the duelling code and on the correct way to treat dog-stealers. At the end of the former dispute he is distressed to realize that she thinks him 'gravely in the wrong', and grows 'conscious of being in the wrong'; while in the other case he at least refrained from scolding her for paying money to the thieves until he thought Flush was safely back home.

Once he seems to have behaved badly at one of their meetings, and writes in bitter repentance. She forgives him graciously and sadly: he must have said something about going away—leaving her—in certain conditions, for she writes, with her genius for style, 'You will not leave me behind, with the harpoon in me, to make red the salt wilderness of waters'. And there is the queer episode of the missing letter. Three months after the first letter, on 20th May 1845, Browning was allowed for the first time to visit Elizabeth. Two days later he wrote her a letter of which we know nothing except that it disturbed and frightened her, apparently containing a declaration of love in passionate terms. She replied that what he had said must be forgotten, wiped out, or she would never see him again. His reaction to this was to write in light-hearted fashion that she knew nothing of him, and that he 'could almost smile at [her] misapprehension of what [he] meant to write'. He hoped he was not being 'brutal' in saying this, and although in the absence of the letter we cannot know who was wrong—Elizabeth in her reading of his words or Browning in his disavowal—there is no doubt the word 'brutal' must have seemed to her appropriate. (One is reminded of Lamb's jesting reply to Fanny Kelly's kindly rejection of his offer of marriage.) He asked for the peccant letter back: she returned it with the advice that it should be burnt; six months later, when he had won her over to a secret engagement, Elizabeth asked that she might have it again, and was rather taken aback when she found it had been burnt indeed. Long afterwards—when she could no longer be said to know

'nothing of him'—Elizabeth used to say Robert had a family resemblance to Lucifer in being proud, and I think pride entered into this incident to prompt a little unkindness.

But there is indeed on his part a deep devotion which makes no demands. Jealousy, that ugly mixture of distrust and the property sense, never casts a shadow; when Elizabeth, almost provocatively, quotes violent letters from an 'adorer', he does not even raise his eyebrows. When, at the end of August 1845, he begins his month-long siege which ended in her agreeing to marry him 'if [God] should free me within a moderate time from the trailing chain of this weakness', he says, 'When you bade me, that time, be silent . . . let me say now, that I loved you from my soul, and gave you my life . . . wholly independent of any return on your part. . . . What you could and would give me of your affection would be supreme happiness to me in the event—however distant.' She remaining obdurate he writes, in a letter that can only be called noble, '. . . from the beginning and at this moment I never dreamed of winning your *love*. . . . Your friendship is my pride and happiness. If you told me your love was bestowed elsewhere, and that it was in my power to serve you there, to serve you there would still be my pride and happiness.' He presses like a great wind or a rising tide, she will not yield; then comes the parental reluctance over her wintering in Italy, as advised by the doctors. He seizes the hour: '. . . you are in the veriest slavery, and I who *could* free you from it, I am here scarcely daring to write. . . . I would marry you now and thus—I would come when you let me, and go when you bade me—I would be no more than one of your brothers . . . when your head ached I should be *here*. I deliberately choose this realization of that dream' (—of sitting simply by you for an hour every day) rather than any other, excluding you, I am able to form of this world, or any world I know.' Then at last, aided by despair at the ban on Italy having become absolute, she surrenders. But still there is that 'trailing chain of weakness', and four months later, at the beginning of the next year, while laying plans for marriage, 'say, at the summer's end', he subjoins that should her health become worse 'I wait till life ends with both of us'.

In the course of one of her letters Elizabeth uses a phrase which is almost a definition of the truest love between man and woman, and 'certainly describes Browning's love very exactly—'an infinite tenderness'. A necessary factor in such a love is a loving patience, and this quality Browning was called upon to show throughout the corres-

pondence. Not the patience of waiting (after all they were married sixteen months after they met), but a patience of forgiveness—forgiveness for Elizabeth's reiterated doubts and exaggerated self-depreciation. She writes, 'I am not worthy of you'. 'If ever you care less for me—you are a man, and free to care less', she says. He will 'find her out', and will then cease to love her. She declares she will not believe their engagement is justified until, after six months of marriage, she shall find Robert still happy. It is indeed true that Robert also is emphatically repetitive on the way he looks up to her, but this is the traditional male attitude, and not less sincere and reasonable for that. He is driven to declare, out of his sore need, that 'there is no love but from beneath'—which draws the obvious comment that this would cut both ways and involve a deadlock! (Better to leave it, as I said above, at admiration.) But of course his loving patience was not lost, could not be lost on such a woman. 'Listen,' she says at last, '... I love you with all the fullness of my nature. Nothing of all this unspeakable goodness and tenderness is lost on me. ... I catch on my face and hands every drop of all this dew.'

There is indeed a rare degree of sympathetic understanding between them. This does not need proof, but it was shown. I think, in Browning's ready acceptance of the financial basis of their marriage; he was without means except for the precarious earnings of a poet, but showed not a trace of conventional hesitation over her proposal that they should live mainly on her private income of £300 a year.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, though Elizabeth feared he might object to her inclusion of both Wilson and Flush in the clopement, Browning agreed instantly and cheerfully, knowing these two had become an integral part of Elizabeth's existence (Flush was a great little dog; he bit Browning twice, with deliberate intent, and deserves better than that Virginia Woolf's biography of him should be catalogued, as I have found it, with books on the care and breeding of dogs.) The one instance where Browning's understanding failed is over Barrett père. He cannot believe in, and will not for a long time take Elizabeth's word for, the indeed incredible position which this horrific parent had taken up; hence he is impatient of the secret engagement, and acquiesces unwillingly in its necessity. Over and over again he would have risked giving it away in his confidence in the appeal of decency and common sense. Hearing of a slight commendatory remark made by Papa about 'Mr Browning the poet—the man of

<sup>1</sup> Carlyle would have saved Jane a great deal of misery if his *fierté économe* had allowed him to be as sensible over her money as Browning was over Elizabeth's.

the pomegranates', he is flattered into opining that Papa is 'infinitely kind at bottom', and that a meeting with the poet-cum-son-in-law would overcome opposition—'if he could know my heart's purposes towards you'. Nevertheless he does accept Elizabeth's terrified assurances that a single angry look from the marble monster would completely incapacitate her for the action he so much desires.

Does all this seem to suggest an absence of passion, without which the relation between a man and a woman can be beautiful, deep and lasting but cannot be love? Towards the end of his life Browning said, 'There was so much pity in what I felt for her', and some have allowed this remark to colour their view of the relationship. For my part, I place it, with Wordsworth's 'I wonder what made me stay so long in France?' in the category of senile maunderings. There is abundant evidence of passion, though not of 'real passion', according to Browning's own analysis—'The selfishness I deprecate is one which a good many women, and men too, call "real passion"—under the influence of which I ought to say "be mine, whatever happens to you"'. No man who is good and great in himself admits of passion in this sense, and my purpose up till now has been to show that there was no egotism of that or any other sort in Browning's love. But that his love was intense, characterized by a tenderness partaking, as Elizabeth said, of infinity, there can be no doubt. Its effect upon his health is sometimes supposed to be an indication of this. Certainly he had frequent headaches during the courtship, and in June 1846 he wrote, 'Every day that passes before *that day* is one the more of hardly endurable anxiety and irritation, to say the least'. After the marriage in St Marylebone Church, next morning he wakes 'quite well, quite free from the sensations in the head. I have not woke so for two years perhaps'; and the morning after that he continues 'quite well'. But these headaches had begun before the meeting on 20th May 1845. On 2nd May he wrote, 'I have had a constant pain in my head for these two months'. And a year even before the first letter he had complained of 'a head that aches oftener than of old'. So this kind of evidence—not worth much anyway—is by no means conclusive.

(A similar kind of inconclusiveness doubtless attaches to the facts that Browning counted 20th May as his birthday, kept a diary of his visits to Elizabeth, with duration measured in minutes, and declared there should never pass a day till his death wherein he would not write to her, excepting those days he should spend with her.) But the note of authen-



tic passion sounds unmistakably from time to time in the letters! 'There is nothing in you that does not draw out all of me. You possess me, dearest. . . . ' Kiss me as I kiss you—all except the adoration which is mine indefeasibly.' 'My dearest Ba, you say "let us both think". Think of this, *you*! Do not for God's sake introduce an element of uncertainty and restlessness and dissatisfaction into the feeling wherein my life lies. . . . What would my life be worth now without you?' Knowing what poetry, music and painting meant to him, we may hear a deep significance in his declaration, 'At times when I could, I think, shut up Shelley, and turn aside from Beethoven, and look away from my noble Polidoro—my Ba's ring—not to say the hand—ah! you know, Ba, what they are to me!' (Elizabeth knew the truth, and spoke it when she said, 'You have so deep and intense a nature that it were impossible for you to love after the fashion of other men, weakly and imperfectly . . . your love comes out like your genius'.)

Yet, though passion cannot be doubted, the elements in Browning's love that are to be stressed are those which I described first—considerateness, loving patience, devotion, sympathetic understanding. Passion, though often in an impure form, is the factor common to all strong sex-relationships: Browning was the perfect lover not so much because his passion was intense as because his nature flowered in these other lovely qualities. The necessary basis of a cocktail is gin, but it is the other ingredients that give it character and commend it to the palate of the epicure.

I cannot leave these enchanting letters without drawing attention to the aid and abetment furnished to their writers by the postal system of the mid-nineteenth century. On several occasions there are three exchanges in one day: Robert, for instance, writes and posts in the morning, Elizabeth receives, replies, and posts before mid-day, Robert receives this reply in the evening and is able to post his reply in time to be delivered next morning. And this sometimes on a Sunday! No wonder Elizabeth afterwards, from Italy, described the Post Office as one of England's 'perfect institutions'.<sup>1</sup>

\*            \*            \*

The proof of the lover is the married man, and all the promise of

<sup>1</sup> Will this amuse anyone? On p. 305 of the first volume of the *Letters* (Smith, Elder, 1906), at the bottom of the page, a letter is signed, 'Your own R.B.', and immediately under the 'R.B.' there stands a good hearty 'X', which set me momentarily chuckling at the idea of the great poet falling into the schoolgirl's language of love (he had just said, '. . . your eyes—I will kiss them'), until I perceived that the 'X' was a printer's sheet-numeral.

spring was fulfilled in the summer of marriage that followed this tempestuous courtship, as we see from Elizabeth's brilliantly informative letters. 'In the fourth month of wedlock', she writes, 'there is no shadow between us; the only change is an increase in Robert's affection . . . we live in the utmost seclusion and perpetual *tête-à-tête*, yet are as happy as people can be'; then, 'after a year's trial of the stuff of marriage', she declares they are 'as happy as two owls in a hole or two toads under a tree-stump'—they think they may 'both claim the Flitch next September'. Year after year she plays variations on the theme, till after nine years he is 'that golden-hearted Robert' . . . he is my right "glory", and the "lute and the harp" would go for nothing beside him' . . . 'Nobody exactly understands him except me, who am in the inside of him and hear him breathe.' There was a lovely incident, consequent on this 'insideness', described only (so far as I know) in one of Browning's letters to Julia Wedgwood: telling of one of his illnesses in Florence, he says, 'I could not get to sleep for the pain, and my wife took my head in her two little hands, in broad daylight, and I went to sleep at once, and woke better'. Two months before she died she wrote of him—'my own Robert'—as 'infinitely handsomer and more attractive than when I saw him first 16 years ago. As to the moony whiteness of the beard (now pointed), it is beautiful, I think—but then I think him all beautiful, and always.'

Robert bears his own witness: 'my story, which I could tell—of her entirely angel nature, as divine a heart as God ever made. I know more of her everyday, I who thought I knew something of her five years ago.' At the end of 1855, when they took an apartment in Paris—'Robert says we are as pleased as if we had never lived in a house before'—no bad indication of a happy marriage, this. There must have been something about Robert's condition to make Elizabeth write, 'I believe in the happiness of marriage, especially for men'. And every time they visited London he went and kissed the stones of the church where they were married.

There was one aspect of lovers' delight which they had perforce to do without. With their late meeting, and their brief intensive engagement, they had no opportunity to lay down a stock of common memories. Miss Elizabeth Bowen, in a homely but precise figure, says that 'memory is to love as the saucer to the cup'; our poet-lovers had to hold the cup in their hands, like a wine-glass. Moreover, they seem to have made no great effort to remedy the deficiency. To F. J. Furnivall, pro-

posing in 1885 to write lives of both poets, Browning wrote that he would tell him all he needed to know about himself, but with regard to Elizabeth—'the little I can confidently profess to *know* I am forced to be silent about, and how very little that little is appears extraordinary to me, and may seem incredible to anyone else. The personality of my wife was so strong and peculiar that I had no curiosity to go beyond it and concern myself with matters which she was evidently disinclined to communicate.' Their love was self-sufficing for fifteen years; had they shared the long evening of life they might have found time for fireside exchanges of recollection.

His considerateness never slackened: Elizabeth speaks over and over again of the 'pure goodness' that always yielded to her wishes. Of course he nursed her with complete devotion whenever she was ill—'Husband, lover, nurse—all three together', she writes. Less fortunate wives might possibly agree with her when she admitted that it was not all women who would like 'the excess of Robert's perpetual and unexceptional tenderness'. He was much moved when Mrs Kemble said he was the only man she knew who behaved like a Christian to his wife. Even the fact that in the later years he used to go merry-making in society while Elizabeth retired to bed—'Robert came home this morning between 3 and 4. A great ball . . .' she writes in 1860—perhaps only shows how perfectly they understood each other. But these two were flesh and blood, not figures in a novel written to illustrate a theory, and their story would have lacked verisimilitude had it not included the well-known clash over Elizabeth's addiction to spiritualistic beliefs and practices. F. G. Kenyon assures us that their differences brought about no discord: the most one can find is that Robert, while allowing her to take in the *Spiritualistic Magazine*, 'hopes something may have happened to it' when it fails to come to hand, and shouts in triumph when one issue contains some adverse criticism of Elizabeth's poems. Yet the memory of this disagreement, Mrs Orr says, sent 'intolerable vibrations' and 'gusts of uncontrollable emotion' through Browning in the later years. There is perhaps an indication of a deeper difference, with feelings genuinely hurt, in the matter of Elizabeth's adulation of Louis Napoleon: she writes, 'Robert will tell you that he hates all Buonapartes, past, present or to come, but he says it in his self-willed, pettish way, as a manner of dismissing a subject he won't think about'. And even that is only the language of a mother vexed with a beloved child.

I do not quite know how to evaluate the fact that, young Robert Wiedemann Barrett Browning (more briefly, Pen) having been born on 9th March 1849, his father has to write on 29th July 1850, 'Yesterday morning Ba had another miscarriage: she was, it is thought, two months advanced towards a confinement; and a fortnight later, 'Four of these mishaps, besides the advent of our babe, amount to a serious drain on a constitution such as hers'. (The first miscarriage had taken place six months after the marriage.) As I say, I do not know whether these facts represent a failure of the considerateness of which I have made so much, or a simple over-estimation on both their parts of the extent of Elizabeth's improvement, or a still more simple operation of the Victorian convention of inevitability in these things. The risks were more terrifying than those of the elopement, but one of Browning's 'miracles' came to their aid: the 'babe' who had got himself born amidst all this travail was everything that could have been hoped even from the union of such a man and such a woman; and Elizabeth survived to delight in him for twelve years. The somewhat ineffectual and undistinguished man who is the end of Pen's story was perhaps the result of Browning's determined scrapping of Elizabeth's fantastic methods of bringing up the boy.

When Elizabeth's death came to end the 'crowded hour' they had chosen in preference to the longer period which might have been secured by anxious restrictions on activity, Browning was not prostrated as he had been twelve years earlier by the death of his mother. He is said to have raved poetically, to have gone about crying 'I want her, I want her!' and to have written letters of frantic sorrow, but these do not remain. The letter to his sister which we have is not the letter of a man broken by bereavement, but rather of one bereaved yet blessed in a happiness too great to be shattered by physical separation. At the end of sixteen perfect years she had died happily, in his arms, blessing him, her last word a smiling 'beautiful': 'Comfortable, dearest?'—'Beautiful!'

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In the unlikely event of any cynically youthful reader having held out so far, he will find some reward for his forbearance in learning that the third and final chapter in Browning's love-story is less idyllic than the other two. There are men, less good than Browning, and in love less devoted, who would yet—having dwelt in dreamland for a period which, though cruelly curtailed, was more than twice the length of

True Thomas's stay—have patterned the rest of life on Browning's own words:

*All my days I'll go the softer, sadder,  
For that dream's sake.*

It was not in Browning's nature to do this, and the effort he made towards it for a few years made him the less Browning, a Browning robbed of his vital geniality. In 1865 he writes that he generally excuses himself from invitations by saying, 'I never accept such', and finds life bearable in consequence: he calls himself a grey owl—'the dark for me'. But this was a temporary dulling of the gay social temperament which was his dower. Mrs Orr says he would not and could not have endured prolonged seclusion from society, and it is all too notorious that in the quarter-century that followed he became a passionate diner-out and attendant at 'parties'.

I am not suggesting that there was anything improper in this. Elizabeth, as we have seen, knew all about this convivial aspect, and would have been the last to wish it to be suppressed after her death. But there was a side to it which I must regard as conflicting with the loyalty which should have been, and on the whole was, the motive of life for him; and this too dates back to the marriage days. If there is one poem of Browning's which one would have sworn was entirely 'dramatic' it is *Any Wife to Any Husband*. But two or three times in Elizabeth's letters we find observations of this sort: in 1858, 'She [Lady Elgin] was always so fond of Robert, as women are apt to be, you know—even I a little . . .'. That is playful and charming, but in March 1861 there is detectable perhaps a tiny sound of impatience: '[Robert] is not thin or worn as I am—no, indeed—and the women adore him everywhere far too much for decency'. No man was ever adored (by more than one woman) without some kind of instigation on his part, and one is left staring in a 'wild surmise' at the possibility that there was, in some mild reproof from Elizabeth, some slight basis for the bitter pathos of that wonderful poem and study of the psychology of two sexes, *Any Wife*:

*Love so, then, if thou wilt! Give all thou canst  
Away to the new faces . . . thou must come  
Back to the heart's place here I keep for thee!*

*Only, why should it be with stain at all?  
 Why must I, 'twixt the leaves of coral,  
 Put any kiss of pardon on thy brow?  
 Why need the other women know so much,  
 And talk together, 'Such the look and such,  
 The smile he used to love with, then and now!'*

My 'surmise' may be wild to idiocy (I hope it is), but the forecast proved painfully true. The 'adoration' was in full swing again by 1867, when Browning wrote, 'I have plenty of new lady-acquaintances, some of them attractive enough, but I don't get intimate with any of them. . . . They all pet me but I'—get away as soon as possible. The avoidance of 'intimacy' does not seem to have been very successful, for already, in 1865, there had been rumours that he was about to re-marry, and in 1867 again he wrote, 'They cackle about my marriage. . . . [It was Jean Ingelow this time, and in 1869 'Miss A., daughter of Lady B'.] It is funny that people think I am likely to do nothing naughty in the world, neither rob nor kill, seduce nor ravish—only honestly marry—which I should consider the two last—and perhaps the two first—naughtinesses united, with the grace of perjury'. This is very well, if distastefully facetious, but some years later he does actually seem to have proposed marriage to Lady Ashburton.<sup>1</sup> I say 'he seems to have' because the evidence is slender though decisive. There is some mention of 'oral tradition', but no one who wrote about Browning from personal knowledge (such as Mrs Orr, William Sharp and Edmund Gosse) makes any reference to the matter. All the written evidence is contained in a letter Browning wrote to Edith Story in April 1872 complaining about the way Lady Ashburton was 'bespattering' him—'yet', he says, 'the worst she charged me with was—having said that my heart was buried in Florence, and the attractiveness of a marriage with her lay in its advantage to Pen—two simple facts, as I told her, which I had never left her in ignorance about for a moment'. The occasion of the 'proposal' appears to have been in the autumn of 1869, when Browning was one of a party staying at Lady Ashburton's Lodge on Loch Luichart, and one may risk the inference that the lady's beauty and high lineage had something to do with the choice of a 'mother', a

<sup>1</sup> The second Baron Ashburton made a point of marrying women with fatal attractions for middle-aged men of genius. It was his first wife (who died in 1858) who so sadly impinged upon the domestic happiness of Jane Carlyle.

position which could otherwise have been more effectively filled by a dozen less glamorous women among his friends—and this without marriage.

I write out of a strong belief that a marriage based on passionate love and happiness should not, under any excuse whatever, be followed by a second marriage, and I consider that the facts just narrated constitute a blot on Browning's otherwise shining scutcheon. And there is not much doubt that Browning came to think so too. Seventeen years later, when he was writing the *Parleyings*, he included one with Daniel Bartoli which is not, like the others, a parley or an argument but a story about a Duke who fell in love with an apothecary's daughter but broke off the marriage arrangements when he found the marriage would mean the surrender of his estates. Then Browning turns to personal reflection: We must not think too badly of the Duke; after all we expect very little from a man in the way of faithfulness, his best in this respect amounting to much the same as a woman's worst. He goes on to imagine the Duke reviewing his memories in old age, and wondering how he could have allowed others to take the place of his first love—a cloud to come between him and the moon:

*comes, late or soon,  
A stumble: up he looks, and lo, the moon  
Calm, clear, convincingly herself once more!  
How could he scape the cloud that thrust between  
Him and effulgence? Speak, fool—duke, I mean!*

It is reasonable to suppose that 'fool' he means himself, and he goes on to tell of a 'bold she-shape' with black eyes and coils of black hair who captured him and mocked his prostrate shame—'Here lies he among the false to Love—Love's loyal liegeman once'. Had he protests—'merely virtue, wisdom, beauty—merged all in one woman' come against him he might have successfully resisted, but with 'impudence' added, 'prone lay faith's defender'. He admits he had loved 'every wicked inch' of her black beauty—'so much truth lives there, 'neath the dead heap of lies'. But he boasts that in his youth he would have been a match 'for sea-foam-born Venus herself'—what the 'bold she-shape' had conquered was but his ghost; he himself had 'died since left and lorn, as needs must Samson when his hair is shorn'.

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*Some day, and soon, be sure himself will rise,  
 Called into life by her who long ago  
 Left his soul whiling time in flesh-disguise, . . .  
 Waiting the morn-star's re-appearance.*

It is astonishing, it is moving, it is rather amusing, and it is more than a little pitiful. This is the man who, ten years earlier, had asked proudly, 'Which of you did I enable once to slip inside my breast?' At the same time far too much has been made of the Ashburton incident. It seems to me ridiculous to see in the pleasant intellectual exchanges with Julia Wedgwood a precursor to the Ashburton proposal, and to read half the succeeding poetry as reflecting Browning's remorse.<sup>1</sup> His feelings about the lapse were probably nothing more noxiously psychological than anger, and he robbed this of some of its mordant effect by turning it upon his partner in crime. What may be regarded as an amusing footnote is recorded in one of Elizabeth's letters to her sister Henrietta. A friend of the Brownings having married a widow (in 1847), Elizabeth writes that 'Robert says he could never have married a widow'. She herself expressed some doubt about this. 'If a woman', she says, 'whom he loved in the last degree had had six husbands and killed them all he would put his head under her feet and think it much to his advantage.' She adds the charitable explanation, 'No human being ever comprehended human love so divinely'.

And to remove the serious element altogether we will note Hugh Walpole's diary entry to the effect that Gosse used to say Browning was in the habit of proposing to any pretty girl who happened to be around.<sup>2</sup>

I am not sure whether his determined avoidance of Florence was due altogether to reasons with which we can sympathize. In 1866 he said he hoped one day to see Leighton's monument over Elizabeth's grave, but as a matter of fact he never went back to Florence at all. 'I don't want to



go to Florence,' he said, 'I can see it all in my head.' This would seem to indicate an almost unnatural lack of sentimentality. He got so far, a few years later, as to say, 'Florence . . . yet I never hear of anyone going thither but my heart is twitched', and perhaps one perceives the real feeling that kept him away in his exclamation, 'Oh me! to find myself some late sunshiny Sunday afternoon, with my face turned to Florence — "ten minutes to the gate, ten minutes home!"'. I think I should fairly end it all on the spot.' But it was after this, in 1878, when he at last did revisit Italy, that he said he would not go to Florence or Rome — 'I know them both too well'. However, we are not all made alike, and his inner compulsions were doubtless creditable. The same reflection, in a negative way, is occasioned by the fact that he expressed in 1866 a vague wish to be buried with his wife, but added, 'It is no matter, however', and later suggested that his place of burial should depend on where he was when he died. This lack of interest probably connects with his conception of the body as the soul's 'old clothes', but I personally get more satisfaction out of the extravagant passion of the lover in Hardy's sonnet who asked of the distant future only one thing, that he and his wife should share one grave — 'That thy worm should be my worm. Love'.

We need have little doubt that Browning continued to live with his memories of his life with Elizabeth, and that every memory moved him deeply. In 1864 he summed up his position in an inimitable figure, which may serve as an apology for his later life: he compared himself to one of those sea-insects which could be dried and kept in a pill-box: he would never have the sea to swim in again, but Julia Wedgwood (to whom he was writing) might be able to set him kicking within the circumference of his (or her) pill-box. Ten years after Elizabeth's death he writes from the coast of France, 'It always gives me a thrill as I see afar *exactly* a particular spot which I was at along with her. At the moment I see the white streak of the *phare* in the sun from the window where I write, and I *think*.' He 'rejoices with all his heart' that the sale of her poetry continues far in advance of that of his own. He prepares a desiderated selection of her poems — 'How I have done it I can hardly say, but it is a dear delight to know her work goes on more and more being read'. For his own work — 'I hope to do much more yet, and that the flower of it will be put into Her hand somehow'. None can fail to recognize the passion of *Prospice* (which brought deep and fervent blessings from 'Variorum' Furness), the tender thought of the 'certain

soul' who looked pityingly down on the swimmer in *Amphibian*, the 'pang and rapture' of imagined reunion in *Householder*, the beauty of the dedication of the great epic to his 'lyric love'. In 1871 he suddenly ends a letter to Isa Blagden, 'O the darkness! I must grope my way to the end'. The memory of Elizabeth and sorrow at her early death had indeed for Browning a religious significance, as well they might, for life and literature can show few women so utterly divine. But, like most of us, he kept his religion in his heart and did not let it much affect his outward life. He must sometimes have prayed somewhat in the sense of Walter de la Mare's poem:

*The words you said grow faint,  
The lamp you lit burns dim . . .*

asking that she might 'haunt' the one left solitary:

*So he, beguiled with earth,  
Yet with its vain things vexed,  
Keep even to his own heart unknown  
Your memory unperplexed.*

Browning was, in his later days, much beguiled with earth. When he came to die his last thought was not 'I shall clasp thee again', but 'how gratifying' that the latest volume had sold out on the first day. But then by this time he was very old, and spoilt, and famous—a condition which must make it hard for the memory to remain 'unperplexed' of a more obscure day when the beloved filled the vision and life went a-Maying with love and poesy.

### 2 THE SOCIAL ANIMAL

If aberration is more interesting than normality, the character of Robert Browning should be unexciting, for he never strayed far from the narrow way, and was one of the best men who ever lived. He himself suggests, through Blougram, that it is at least the possibility of error, the proneness to temptation, that fascinates in our study of human nature—'Our interest's on the dangerous edge of things'. But Browning was too busy and too happy to be attracted by the false glitter of evil. And though the observer may find a succession of sprawls more excit-



ing than steady progress, to the actor in life's arena it is, as *Apparent Failure* puts it, 'wiser being good than bad . . . fitter being sane than mad'. Browning would have made a most unrewarding subject for psycho-analysis: 'Victorian as he was, he hadn't an inhibition in his system—at least there is no mental or physical ill that can be attributed to his possession of such. If he had a mother-complex its only result was that he liked to sit with his arm round her waist and wept exaggeratedly when she died; it didn't prevent him from marrying and leaving the country, and he doesn't seem to have been a bit jealous of his father.

A trifle 'mad' he may have been; 'good' he certainly was. If the devil's advocate were put up to blacken Browning's fame, what would be the worst thing he could find in his record? (It would be something arising out of that action which constitutes the single serious flaw in his behaviour as a lover, the proposal to Lady Ashburton. However the proposal was made and received, a disastrous quarrel ensued: the lady wrote angry letters and 'calumniated' Browning in society. This does not concern us—our interest is in Browning's reaction, which was more natural than commendable, and may be judged from the fact that two years later he was referring to her in a letter to Story as 'that contemptible Lady Ashburton—I mind her no more than any other black-beetle—so long as it don't crawl up my sleeve'. This does not come well from the chivalrous writer of the love-letters. The thunder rumbled on for many years, and possibly occasioned Gosse's remark (in *Personalia*, 1890) that the poet had 'utterly erred to the sorrow of all who knew him'. Harriet Hosmer, Lady Ashburton's sculptress friend, but also a dear friend of the Brownings (she had made a cast of their clasped hands), seems to have helped to spread the 'calumnies', and was included in the wrath: fifteen years later she wrote in affectionate terms to ask Browning to resume the old friendship, but the still-injured poet called the approach 'impudent' and was adamant in his refusal.)

Browning confessed to having been born 'supremely passionate': he could lose control of himself when offended; he used to 'bite flowers to bits' in his impatience at not being able to possess himself of them thoroughly; he was 'furious about the French treatment of Abd-el-kadr', 'furious about the Athenæum', 'frantic about the Crimea'. Later in life Julia Wedgwood called him 'the most impatient man in the world'—yet love had made him commendably patient under Barrett's treatment of Elizabeth. We have seen that his wife thought him as proud as Lucifer, and there is no doubt that the undignified effects of

the Ashburton *débâcle* were attributable to passion and pride. There were minor consequences of the combination. The angry lines to the dead Fitzgerald I do not place among them as in any way reprehensible, except for some poorness of taste in the concluding line. But Browning's way of taking the petty hostility of Alfred Austin was not magnanimous. 'I stimulate myself', he wrote to Isa Blagden in 1871, 'by the reflection that it stings such vermin as little Austin that I "haunt gilded saloons"'. (Indeed the letters to Isa Blagden show him indulging in petty gossip and bad-tempered personal criticism quite absent from the rest of his correspondence. But then they also give evidence of unhappiness, that strong corrosive.) Miss Cobbe saw him stamping in a frenzy of rage at Elizabeth's gullibility, and he was decidedly impolite to the critics: he called them a 'verminous tribe', and 'classified' Henry Reeve of the *Edinburgh Review* as the 'Edinburgh bug', otherwise 'stinking Reevii'. But, apart from Lady Ashburton, the worst charge that I should admit against Browning concerns two unanswered letters. Soon after the arrival in Pisa he received from Carlyle what both he and Elizabeth felt to be the most wonderful of all the expressions of approval of the marriage; an equally moving letter came from Domett in New Zealand on Elizabeth's death: both letters went unacknowledged on some excuse about the 'heart too full' or 'couldn't bear to write'; an example of a common failing with lesser folk—an egotistic regard for personal feelings leading to lack of consideration for those of others. But this is surely a small tale of shortcomings in a terrifically full and fully documented life of seventy-seven years.

In truth the man's moral equipment was superbly complete, and it may be that before this book is finished we shall have decided that Browning is one of the very rare cases among major poets of the man being greater than his work.<sup>1</sup> Wives are like soldiers in that what they say is not evidence (since they ordinarily see either only the best or only the worst of their husbands), but in view of Elizabeth's very high opinion of Browning's poetry it is worth noting that she said, 'his genius is the least thing about him, the moral nature being of the very noblest, as all who ever knew him admit'; and again, 'the intellect is so little in comparison to all the rest, to the womanly tenderness, the inexhaustible goodness, the high and noble aspirations of every hour'.

<sup>1</sup> It is often asserted that this must necessarily be always so, but the view neglects the possibility that the artist may be an instrument, made perhaps of some base metal, in the hands of a super-human Artist

His life is strewn with instances of the egotism of the artist replaced by self-abnegation and kindness. These range from the arduous guardianship of the aged and fractious Landor to his helpful response to a school-girl who had sent him the essay she had been set on 'The Meaning of *Prosperity*'. His disinterested and courteous attention to the derelict Landor was beyond praise, and included keeping him in a mollified condition by frequent quotation of his works; and with Lytton and other invalids he sat up at night at the risk of his health. He was so heedful of the requests of book-borrowers in Florence that Elizabeth complained that they never had a book to read themselves. He learnt from his mother a great love of animals which lasted all his life: as a young man at New Cross he was on intimate terms with a toad, and in Italy he took pleasure in teaching his small son to like snakes and owls, though Pen afterwards took up shooting, to his father's distress. He hated vivisection, and despised its arguments.

Some of his finest characteristics were inherited or acquired from his father, who seems to have been an extraordinarily good and gifted man: on his death his son said he had 'kept his own strange sweetness of soul till the end'. Browning's physical fitness, common-sense, happy disposition and essential goodness were bred into him at home, together with a love of Greek. The qualities with which his parents endowed him were beautified by that disciplined liberty which is the foundation of happiness, and strengthened by moral instruction which, though narrow according to modern standards, gave guidance in youth and left valuable habits of mind, while setting up, as I have indicated, no 'complexes' due to repressed instincts. Not only had he no money for the more expensive forms of dissipation but no taste for the lower forms, so that he was able to say to Elizabeth, when he was trying to win her love, 'I thank God that . . . I have been, to the utmost of my power, not unworthy of his introducing you to me', and to declare that he had been 'a kind of male prude' with regard to young women. So too he was quixotically honest. Being offered by a friendly editor a review of *Sordello* on condition that the reviewer was given a preliminary sight of the poem, Browning felt this would be unfair to other magazines and refused, losing both the review and the editor's friendship. He consistently (with very few exceptions) declined to allow his poems to be published in periodicals, stating as his reason, 'If I publish a book, and people choose to buy it, that proves they want to read my work. But to have them turn the pages of a magazine and find *me*—that is to be an

uninvited guest.' When they began housekeeping in Italy he insisted on a weekly settlement of all bills; Elizabeth, whose family tradition was different, complained that this was 'morbid and unpoetical', but he told her that when he heard of people being in pecuniary difficulties, i.e. in debt, *his* sympathies went out to the butcher and the baker. In later life he lost his temper with publishers and others who continued to owe *him* money. We have seen that he could be proud, but what Anne Thackeray noted as a 'generous humility' was a more intrinsic element in his nature. He was always sincerely appreciative of other men's merits and deeply grateful for kindness. In his last illness, says Fanny Browning, 'the dear patient was always thanking me and expressing such gratitude to everyone who had cared for him'. When they were in Paris he and Elizabeth would have liked to make the acquaintance of Béranger, and were told he was easy of access, but they could not summon courage to go to the door and introduce themselves. A blend of chivalry and moral courage appears in an amusing story he told Elizabeth of how he once at a party took action on behalf of a wife insulted by her husband, to the astonished dismay of the husband.

This seems to me a pleasant picture. Mrs Orr, though irritated by Browning's unorthodox religious views, nevertheless admitted that his life was essentially Christian in spirit, and Kenyon said he was (as Milton recommended) a poet in his heart and life. But a veritable banquet of virtues is indigestible without the condiment of humour—under which term are comprised sanity, practical common-sense, balance, as well as good-humour and a sense of the comic. One instance of the last-named gift may suffice: being challenged to versify the story of the young woman who accepted the boozing boatman's offer to give up drinking if she would swim to him in the garb of Godiva, Browning wrote:

*Accoutred as she was not, plunging in,  
She watered, so to speak, the boatman's gin.*

There was about him a large good-humoured tolerance. In 1867, having secured the nomination but not the appointment to the Professorship of Poetry at Oxford, he took both the possibility and the disappointment with equanimity; nearly twenty years later, at the reception after his honorary degree at Edinburgh, being asked anxiously by his hostess if he objected to so much adulation, he replied, 'Object to it? Good

gracious, no! I've waited forty years for it!' It was about the same time that he laughingly interceded on behalf of the Oxford student who had dropped a red-cotton night-cap on his head. The only failure of his sense of proportion is seen in the exaggerated and protracted grief over the death of his mother, which Elizabeth explained by his over-riding passionate and sensitive nature. Apart from this he was always level-headed and sensible. When the Italian sculptor spoilt Leighton's designs for Elizabeth's tomb in Florence, making his own alterations, Browning, in England, took the circumstances calmly: 'I will have no wrangling over the grave.' His attitude to the pretensions of the lesser Napoleon and of the spiritualists was entirely sane. In politics he adopted the middle course—no 'socialist' but no reactionary. Some minor instances of practical sanity are interesting. Though ingrainedly honest he recognized, during his courtship, the necessity of dissimulation in a good cause. He knew that freedom is better than wealth, and wrote to Elizabeth of his 'cherished sweet independence'—'this light rational life I lead'. With his non-conformist upbringing it is remarkable that, though a non-smoker, he drank wine in moderation. Even the vexed question of the '*beccafichi*' is doubtless to be settled under this head: it is alarming to learn that Robert and Elizabeth apparently made neither difficulties nor apologies over eating thrushes and larks with their chianti, yet Browning probably said, 'Don't let's fuss—this is Italy',<sup>1</sup> and pointed out that there is only a sentimental gulf between eating the cock that crows in the morn and the thrush that sings on the orchard bough. He was, like Shelley, most inartistically practical about such matters as travelling arrangements, and he shaved Flush to rid him of Florentine fleas.

The combination of goodness and good humour provides a password to the happiness or optimism which is Browning's best-known characteristic. Optimism is of the intellect, and will be considered in the next section, but the happiness on which it is founded stands itself on a physical basis which in Browning was extremely adequate. It is not correct to say, as has often been said, that he was 'pathetically ignorant of illness'. For the first half of his life his general state of good health was frequently broken by minor troubles consequential upon his mother's delicate constitution. In the early years he seems to have had an almost

<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth wrote, in another connection, that 'Robert talks learnedly of the instincts of nations in relation to the food they select', and on at least one occasion, following the English 'instinct', they went in for 'one-third of a turkey'.

chronic headache, which got worse during the fretful delays of courtship, vanished temporarily on marriage, but returned as 'the old vertiginousness', so that Elizabeth would warn him, 'you will have your headache in a minute'. In Italy he suffered several bouts of fever and ulcerated throat; but after forty we hear no more of headache or any other kind of ill-health. At no time was he other than bursting with physical and mental energy: in the last years in Florence, this energy refusing to flow along poetic lines, it went into clay and stone. At seventy he gave the impression that he was never to be old, in the last years of his life he was active and vigorous in mind and body, and he died strong to the last, without suffering and knowing he was dying the death a happy man would desire.

Browning was a considerable walker, though not among the masters: he told Elizabeth that when he had anything to occupy his mind, 'I almost run'. From Italy she wrote that they both had gypsy blood in their veins which every now and then sent them wandering far among the hills. He swam much in the sea, though not till after 1858, at which date he told Isa Blagden he was 'indisposed to salt water'; he was a good horseman, and, like Hamlet, skilled in the foils. In early manhood he travelled rough and had adventures. In Italy he got his coat torn in separating two oxen-drivers who were stabbing at each other with knives, and long before this he demonstrated the rarer moral courage when, 'driving his hat more firmly on his head', he stood up to the great Macready on behalf of a subordinate actor who he thought was being unfairly treated in the rehearsals of one of his plays. Mary Cowden Clarke, who accused him of an addiction to 'lemon-coloured kid gloves', and of being 'the glass of fashion and the mould of form', should have remembered that this description was first applied, with no depreciatory intent, to a great Prince. (To dress with distinction may be a minor expression of fine living.) And it has been pointed out that Browning, with his electric handshake and loud voice, was no exquisite. A charming description is given of him by Hawthorne, who met him with Elizabeth at Monckton Milnes' breakfast-table in 1856: 'handsome, with dark hair a very little frosted . . . gently impulsive, talking as if his heart were uppermost.'<sup>1</sup> His sight never deteriorated, though one eye had a long and the other a short focus.<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth said he had 'serene spiritual eyes—the calmest I ever saw'.

Here were no barriers to the happy temperament which was quite

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by James Pope-Hennessy in *The Flight of Youth*.



definitely bred into him by the atmosphere of love and freedom in which Browning grew up. As Mr Osbert Burdett says, his energies were not wasted in rebellion or suffering. Leisure and liberty and freedom of will—these talismans of happiness were all his, and John Kenyon was wrong in his suggestion that he would have been the better for an ‘object in life’ and ‘seven or eight hours a day of occupation’—if he meant these to be imposed from outside, for we never get the impression of Browning as an idler. The parents doubtless spoiled him, but they did so within the strong framework of a moral code: when Robert and Elizabeth carried on the spoiling with Pen they left out the moral framework, relying on example and love; there was nothing unreasonable in this, but in the event it opened the way for the young man’s philandering in Brittany and slacking at Oxford. With Pen’s father the system, such as it was, worked perfectly, giving as product a man not only of lovely instincts and sensibilities, high ideals and enthusiasms, all of which remained fresh and active to the end of his life, but with a joyous confidence in himself and in life—in which respect he presents a marked contrast to Tennyson.

His comparative indifference to the neglect which lasted till past middle life may show the egoistic serenity of the pure artist, but was certainly more easily attainable by reason of his dwelling in the citadel of happiness. His happiness was not made by his marriage: it existed before 1845 and survived the blow of 1861. His life was full of love—love of parents, of friends, of wife, of child: and love is the moving spirit of happiness. His faith in God, and in life, formed another indispensable element. Writing to Julia Wedgwood in 1869 he said, ‘I never implied, I hope, that I have not, nor always had, nearly all the conditions that make life happy’: which, more directly, means, ‘I have always been, and still am, happy’. Miss Wedgwood, who was at all times anxious to show her sympathy over the loss of Elizabeth, replied in effect, ‘Surely you mean you *have been* happy: you cannot be so now’. She did not understand, as Browning did, the truth of Scawen Blunt’s inspired cry: ‘He who has once been happy is for aye out of destruction’s reach.’ On his seventieth birthday he wrote to Mrs Skirrow: ‘Let who will find life not worth living—I have had reason enough to enjoy it.’ Of the famous *Epilogue* Mrs Orr inexplicably said that she found it ‘difficult to refer to a coherent mood of any period of the poet’s life’. Yet Browning’s daughter-in-law tells us that a few days before his death he read the *Epilogue* to her, and coming to the third verse, ‘One who never turned

his back . . . never doubted . . . never dreamed wrong would triumph . . . held we fall to rise' (the very voice of the optimist), said, 'It may sound conceited, but I think I can honestly say it is true'.

On this foursquare foundation of goodness and sanity, health and happiness, there arose a personality strong, confident and inspiring, richly human and warm-blooded. The robust health of mind and body might have been expected to result in a personality rather unattractively masculine, but Elizabeth is reassuring on this point, saying that she does not use the term 'manly' in praise of men, in fact detests a 'masculine man'. What she felt in Robert was the 'flower' of his nature with its 'mystical perfume', and she fondly declared that no one—certainly no woman—could ever get angry with him. There was always something childlike about him. He told Elizabeth before they were married that he had always enjoyed continuing a child at home, and hoped she would still lead his will in little daily matters of choice. She discovered that this chiefly meant that he would not do his own shopping: she had even to buy his gloves for him. These simple, childlike, feminine elements were the product of the other side of his personality: if the obverse was an assured strength the reverse was a nervous sensitivity. On the one hand he could, by two-and-a-half hours of persuasiveness and pressure, overcome the reluctance of the French railway officials to transport Pen's pony by express train; on the other hand he could not extemporize a public speech: at seventy-two he had to apologize to Professor Knight for not having been able even to 'say a few words' at a meeting of the Wordsworth Society. About the same time this society lion astonishingly confessed, 'I could not enter a drawing-room if I did not know from long experience that I *can*!' He told Mrs Orr that he felt Fitzgerald's tactless words about Elizabeth's death as a sharp physical blow for days. The characteristic had its lighter side: Browning horrified his wife by precipitately getting up from the piano when Pen came into the room playing the drum. And one may agree that it was indeed a 'spinsterish delicacy' that made him, as he told Elizabeth in one of the *Letters*, unable to wash his face or brush his hair before his father.

Browning's mental endowment was no less remarkable than his moral and physical outfit. Whatever his rank as a poet his imaginative gift cannot be in question. His intellect showed its power in his ability to master masses of material, and he had a capacious memory, with rich stores of multi-coloured knowledge hoarded from childhood and constantly replenished. The appearance of wide research given by some of

his longer poems is somewhat illusory: mistakes are not uncommon, and it is the virtue of genius to make a mole-hill of knowledge look like a mountain. Though he described himself as 'self-conscious', Landor's ascription to him of the 'active step' and 'inquiring eye' correctly indicates him as an extrovert. What his mind was it was of its own original self: it had enjoyed or endured no academic discipline. When the time came for Pen to be formally educated his father decided that his own instruction should take the place of school, but that Oxford should come in due course, making the comment, 'Neither School nor University would have been any good to me, but Pen is different—he imitates and emulates and all that'. It is probable that Browning's intellectual creative egoism would have been starched and stiffened by professional methods, if it had not rejected them as Wordsworth and Coleridge did. His real mental gymnastic was a strenuous exploration of a very wide range of literature, classical and modern. He was seldom without a Greek author in his pocket. His taste in English literature was sound: in his youth he adored Shelley and Byron and believed in the promise of Keats; he preferred the early Wordsworth; he liked *Wuthering Heights* in despite of Gladstone's disapproval; he hugely enjoyed that hugely enjoyable poem, Clough's *Bothie*; he delighted in Macaulay's *History*; to Ruskin he wrote, 'Whenever I chance on an extract (from you) it makes me glad at heart and clear in mind'; in Landor he found 'passages not exceeded in beauty and subtlety by any literature that I am acquainted with'; of Swinburne he thought less: 'he has genius, and writes verses in which to my mind there is no good at all'; and he described Rossetti's poems as being 'scented with poetry'. His only critical lapses are connected with Tennyson, for whose poetry on the whole he had the most generous admiration. He seems to have felt (with Elizabeth) that 'The splendour falls' was 'greatly inferior to the other lyrics in *The Princess*', and he (incredibly) disliked the changes made in *Oenone* and other poems for the 1842 re-issue. There is a fascinating passage in the Wedgwood letters in which he proposes an ironic ending to *Enoch Arden* (which he told Tennyson he considered perfect) to take the place of its present pathetic one. The proposal (which was doubtless not intended seriously) appears to have been instigated by the 'costly funeral', which has troubled other sticklers for the *mot propre*. But Tennyson knew his villagers.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Browning's assertion that he admired Byron 'more than Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey put together' should not perhaps be regarded as a considered judgment.

Browning inherited from his father an interest in crime and criminals *via* old books discovered on bookstalls. His passion for music and pictures derived from his childhood, when his mother's playing was supplemented by a friendly organist, and his frequent attendance at the Dulwich Gallery by much reading of books on art. He was a brilliant conversationalist, and meeting him was said to be a spiritual refreshment. Hallam Tennyson said that talk between his father and Browning was the best he ever heard. But it is in Gosse's *Personalities* that we find the really illuminating picture of Browning the talker, at his incomparable best in private. Gosse describes the cascade of his talk, rising and falling and covering the whole gamut of vocal melody; how he welcomed the visitor with a shout from the other end of the passage, and was in full flood of talk at a distance of twenty feet; how, having got his victim firmly wedged in an armchair, he would walk round and round him, now gesticulating, now diving for a book, pouring out all the while a turmoil of thoughts, fancies and reminiscences, the very spirit of intellectual vigour and genial strength.

Through the pattern of Browning's character which I have been trying to trace there runs the conspicuous bright thread of his sociability. Browning was no solitary, but *par excellence* the social animal: he loved people, 'men and women', individually and in numbers. It is true that he told Elizabeth in one of the *Letters* that he had always 'hated society', but put up with it for some good he might find there; and again, 'General society depresses my spirits'. It is true that he wrote in the same strain to Isa Blagden twenty-five years later: 'I suppose it is, on the whole, a gain in some respects to the soul to have seen so many people: I mainly care about human beings, yet I feel weary of the crowd I chose to fancy it would do me good to see.' But his life seems to make nonsense of these assertions, and we must take them to represent a measure of self-deception. The social life intensified after 1861, but already, before 1845, Browning had many friends, and we hear of supper-parties at Macready's, Talfourd's and elsewhere. There was a group of Camberwell young men, calling themselves 'The Set', Browning and Alfred Domett among them, who met regularly between 1835 and 1840 at a house or a tavern. Elizabeth remarked on the pleasing fact that he had lived in London society without adopting its sins. In Italy, though they avoided the English colony and the general run of visitors, they were seldom without the company of literary men, artists, or other people of intelligence and culture. In 1852, when they

had returned to Florence after a stay in Paris, Elizabeth said, 'Robert has been demoralized by Paris, and thinks Florence dull after the boulevards', and a few years later she was writing, 'Dissipation decidedly agrees with Robert, though he is horribly hypocritical and prefers an evening at home with me'. In the last years of his marriage, and for almost the whole of the period between Elizabeth's death and his own, his attendance at parties and dinners is notorious. When in 1883 he bought a house in Venice for his son and daughter-in-law he said, 'I myself shall stick to London, which has been so eminently good and gracious to me, so long as God permits'.

And yet, how if there should be something after all in those assertions of distaste for society which I appeared so easily to dismiss? I do not think there can have been much, but they may represent a genuine factor in Browning's mind that was disturbed by marriage. The conviviality was on a modest scale in early days, when Browning was leading what he lovingly characterized as a 'light rational life'—the life of a free bachelor poet of high ideals. The notion is not a very promising one, but it is possible that, since Browning had reached the age of thirty-two without any thought of marriage, he was (but for Elizabeth) a pre-destinate bachelor. It is interesting to speculate on the course of his life, and his verse, if, after the first visit on 20th May 1845, Papa Barrett had resolutely forbidden a second. Elizabeth would have been to Browning not his wife but his Beatrice—with what effect upon his verse, and perhaps upon the social quality of his life. But these are fancies.

Whether or not Browning was gregarious by nature, there is no disputing his genius for friendship. He saw possibilities of friendship wherever he went, and seized them eagerly, and in the few instances where the relation broke down he was deeply resentful. The special case of Lady Ashburton has been sufficiently noted: it shows that Browning, as one might have expected, was a good hater. The quarrel with Macready was due to high spirits on both sides and was made up in after years; that with Forster had more complex causes. John Forster, who was of the same age as Browning, recognized his early genius, and on the strength of *Paracelsus* 'named him at once with Shelley, Coleridge and Wordsworth'. Yet after reading *Colombe's Birthday* he unaccountably declared, 'As far as Mr Browning has gone we abominate his taste as much as we respect his genius'. Moreover, when Dickens wrote him a letter full of enthusiasm for *Paracelsus*, Forster did not show it to Browning but put it away to print fifty years later in the *Life*

of *Dickens*. At a dinner-party Browning found Forster's attitude so offensively patronizing that he threatened him with a wine-decanter; yet a few years later they are found as good friends as ever: Browning never forgot Forster's early help, and it was to him that he wrote one of the two letters giving a full account of Elizabeth's last illness and death. The severance from Rossetti was 'unilateral': smarting under the attacks which had labelled his poetry 'fleshly', Rossetti saw in *Fifine*, quite unreasonably, another jibe at his 'lazy, laughing, languid' *Jenny*, and rudely terminated a friendship of twenty-five years' standing. The friendship with Julia Wedgwood, though short-lived by Browning's usual standard, was not 'broken' until it had run its natural course and given both the participants all they ought to have expected from the connection. These are but occasional dissonances in a lifetime of harmony; as with his conduct in general, the halfpenny worth of failure but proves the man mortal. The mere list of some of his friends, most of them life-long, suggests a surfeit. There was Domett, 'my own friend Alfred over the sea'—next to those to Elizabeth, Browning's letters to him are his best; W. J. Fox, the Unitarian minister who discovered Browning even before Forster; T. N. Talfourd, who at one of Macready's dinner-parties proposed the health of Robert Browning as 'the youngest English poet', and Wordsworth, who on the same occasion leaned across the table and said he was 'proud to drink Mr Browning's health'; Barry Cornwall, whose widow was afterwards cared for by Browning; John Kenyon, who induced him to write to Elizabeth, contrasted his 'common sense' and 'muddy metaphysics', and left him £11,000; Ruskin, Thackeray, Dickens, Lockhart; Story and his family; Carlyle, for whom he had a very deep love, and whom he helped in his historical research, but who never felt that Browning had fulfilled the hopes he had of him in 1846; Mrs Carlyle was at first included warmly in Browning's friendship, and in 1851 he told Carlyle that she was the woman whom he wished most of all to bring together with Elizabeth, yet when she died Browning's expression of sorrow lacked warmth, and in after years he was wont to maintain that if there was domestic unhappiness in the Carlyle household Jane was chiefly responsible (it may be, as Chesterton suggests, that the sooty kettle which Browning absent-mindedly deposited on Jane's hearthrug had an unfortunate effect on their relations; she said Carlyle liked Tennyson better than Browning, which may have been wishful thinking). To take up the tale again, Browning had a deep affection for both Tennyson and Mrs

Tennyson, and the letters which passed between the two old poets on Tennyson's eightieth birthday are profoundly moving; Frederick Tennyson was there as well; then Landor, whom Browning described, to Elizabeth's amusement, as 'gentle and sweet'; among painters, Leighton and Val Prinsep; Hood, for whose benefit when he was ill Browning broke his rule and allowed several poems to appear in Hood's *Monthly Repository*; Milsand, the penetrating French critic, for whom Browning's love was exceptionally deep, and of whom he said, 'I never knew or shall know his like among men'; . . . and very many others.

And these are all men. Mrs Orr said that Browning's natural and most complete confidants were women, and that he preferred their society. The foregoing paragraph shows that he at least kept a healthy balance between the sexes, but some of his most interesting friendships were with women. Most of these belong to the period after his wife's death, but two of the best date from earlier—both Fanny Haworth and Isa Blagden were close friends of Elizabeth. Isa Blagden, whom Browning described as 'perfect in companionship as in other ways', came to the rescue of the stricken poet and his little son, and if he really felt the need to marry again she was the obvious choice. Of the later friends, for years he was accompanied to all the London concerts by Ann Egerton Smith, and after a wearing summer he would go abroad with her to recuperate; there was Lady Elgin, whom Elizabeth had already noted as being so fond of Robert; there was Mrs Charles Skirrow, the lion hunter, at whose table Browning once sulked solemnly because someone had forgotten 'his port wine'; we may add his sister-in-law, Arabel Barrett,\* recipient of the loveliest letters in praise of Elizabeth, and his daughter-in-law, Fanny, to whom he was always most affectionate and charming.

There was, of course, Mrs Sutherland Orr herself, a widow, sixteen years Browning's junior. She met him in Italy in the fifties, and probably knew Elizabeth hardly at all. She was on terms of close friendship with Browning for the last twenty years of his life in London, got him to talk about himself and his poems, and made excellent use of the results: one must remember that her books represent the mind of the poet in his seventh and eighth decades, and that they are not necessarily the worse for that.

An unusually interesting and valuable relation (valuable to Browning and to us his readers) was the 'broken friendship' with Julia Wedgwood, which has come to light in comparatively recent years through the

publication of their correspondence, admirably edited by Mr Richard Curle. The correspondence began in May 1864, not quite three years after Elizabeth's death, and from then till February 1865 letters on both sides were frequent, and interspersed with visits, almost in the old way. But though the tone is affectionate on both sides, Browning made it quite clear from time to time, on some half-dozen occasions, that his life belonged irrevocably to his dead wife: he said, for instance, that if he was a weathercock he had 'rusted', and was not likely to turn again. Nevertheless he told Miss Wedgwood that he liked 'walking with her in his sacred place', and she played her part by never speaking of Elizabeth except in terms of reverence. Miss Wedgwood was a cultured and intelligent woman, and the letters are full of interesting exchanges of opinion. Then, suddenly, hearing rumours of gossip concerning the friendship and believing also that Browning is being annoyed by the gossip, the lady writes to say his visits to her had better stop. Apparently the letters stopped too, for between March 1865 and October 1868 only two letters, one on each side, have been preserved. Then Browning sends her the first two volumes of *The Ring and the Book* (and later the remaining two), and for about a year and a half there is a new exchange of letters, much less frequent and almost entirely concerned with the great poem—her criticisms, often severe, and Browning's resolute replies. The correspondence fades out rather than ends.

The affair is not without its pathos, for Miss Wedgwood, though more than twenty years younger than Browning, was to some extent 'in love' with him: this is hardly apparent from the correspondence, but is made clear by a letter to Miss Wedgwood from a woman friend, printed by Mr Curle in his introduction. There is no doubt that Browning's affectionate manner and terms of speech contained possibilities of wrong interpretation for his lady-correspondents, and there was a degree of self-indulgence on his part in all these female friendships, but—except in the one notorious case—he always had the car under control however fast it was going.

It was one of Marcus Brutus's proudest boasts that he had never had a friend who was not true to him. With negligible exceptions Browning could have made a similar claim, and (prefacing that Disraeli called him 'noisy and conceited' and Mary Drew found him 'insensitive') I cannot do better than conclude this section with some of the things his friends said about him. One of the early Camberwell 'Set', not Domett, described him as 'a noble fellow—his life so pure, so energetic, so laborious,



so loftily enthusiastic—it is impossible to know and not to love him'. Kenyon, quoted by Elizabeth, judged him as 'strikingly upright and loyal in all his ways and acts', and 'impeccable as a gentleman'. Harriet Martineau found him in 1847 'clear, purpose-like, full of good sense and fine feeling and fun, though occasionally irritable'. Chorley the music critic called him 'glorious, genial, brilliant'; Mrs Jameson described his nature and manners as 'sunshiny and captivating'. To Frederick Tennyson he was 'a man of infinite learning, jest and bonhomie, and moreover a sterling heart that reverbs no hollowness'. Jowett in later years spoke of his 'open, generous nature', and said he was 'a perfectly sensible poet, entirely free from enmity, jealousy, or any other littleness'. What Gosse wrote of him might serve for his epitaph: 'The subtlest of writers, he was the simplest<sup>1</sup> of men, and he learned in serenity what he taught in song.' No man is so praised without desert.

### 3. THE NUCLEUS OF THOUGHT AND BELIEF

A poet's poetic philosophy—the understanding of life, or the perplexity before life, or the impressions of life, made manifest to us through his poetry—is not the same as the everyday philosophy which he, like other thinking adults, must have built up as a mental background to life. This is, as it were, the soil from which the poetry springs, and the tree will vary with the soil that supports it, though the sun of inspiration and the fresh air of technical skill are even more vital to its beauty and shapeliness. Moreover, it is desirable that we should know what a poet thought and believed, so that we may know what meaning to give to terms used in his poetry. The word 'God' means different things in Wordsworth, Kipling and Francis Thompson, and 'sin' does not mean in Milton what it means in Swinburne or Wilde. In Browning's case we have ample scope for an inquiry into his opinions and beliefs in the letters he wrote, in reported conversations, and in things said about him by those who knew him well. As one might suppose from his character, he had, from early manhood, clear and decided views on most things, and was not easily led aside into wild speculations. People suppose, said Elizabeth, that genius produces a mind lopsided: they should consider Robert. When she wrote that before the great god Pan could 'make a poet out of a man' the man, as a man, must first be wrecked and ruined,

<sup>1</sup> This is the word used in *Personalia*. in Gosse's article on Browning in the *D.N.B.* he used the same sentence but substituted 'simplest' for 'simplest'.

she may have had her invalid self in mind, but not her healthy-minded husband. Browning's massive stability was perhaps founded on the four-fold variation of his grand-parentage—English, Creole (though English Creole), German, Scottish. The German-Scottish blend has been said to explain his 'metaphysical' tendency, but it has yet to be seen whether we are to call Browning a metaphysical poet, and our three most decisively metaphysical poets, Donne, Blake and Coleridge, came of purely English stock as far as is known (Blake with perhaps a dash of Irish).

Whatever Browning's views, they were his own, and formulated through direct observation. Philosophers point out that we can really *know* only ourselves and our own experience—all the rest is inference and guess-work. Arguing with Francis Cobbe on the relative preponderance of good and evil in human nature and maintaining that good 'had it', Browning concluded: 'Well, I can only speak as I myself have found it.' This seems to me the most logical approach, if experience has been reasonably wide. It is sometimes brought against Browning that he had never known poverty and suffering, and so was disqualified from profound or comprehensive understanding of life. The 'poverty' suggestion is not worth discussion, as its application would arbitrarily rule out half the philosophers and poets; as to the necessity of suffering, genius sees more in a momentary glimpse than ordinary intelligence sees in a day-long stare—and Browning had his 'glimpses' of suffering. Another fact which I find interesting is that though precocious, Browning did not draw inspiration from his childhood. Julia Wedgwood had written, 'I saw my stars in the early dawn', to which Browning replied that he did not understand this—'I observe nowhere in youth, except in diseased and dying youth, the religious instinct'; the real instinct, he believed, was developed in later years, and he himself, he *knew*, had 'outgrown all the considerations which used to manage, for better and worse, the wise person of my perfect remembrance and particular dislike'—that is, himself in boyhood.

Browning was a man of his generation in that he accepted Christianity with reservations. But his reservations were not those of the majority of his contemporaries, of whom Tennyson is more typical. Browning's reservations were not occasioned by doubt, but were positive, and represented his own criticisms. It was only from the standpoint of a rigid orthodoxy that he could be considered as taking part in the general literary movement towards agnosticism which

occupied the second half of the century. Of the essential truth of Christianity he was instinctively certain, and was similarly convinced of reunion after death, but he refused the final certainty afforded by revelation. He felt indeed that for men to become literally certain of immortality would be dangerous: life as we know it would be impossible. He was fortunate in his religious upbringing: a child must have roots, if only that he may have something to tear up; but Browning's early church-going was by no means exclusively non-conformist—he grew impatient of the dreary services, and after his few years of atheism prompted by his adoration of Shelley he adopted the eclectic practice of going to hear whatever preacher, of whatever denomination, pleased him best. Nevertheless in the early days of his marriage he thanked God he was likely to die a dissenter, while admitting that the dissenters had faults like other Christian bodies. He felt the beauty of a ritualistic service, envied the Catholic practice of carrying the crucifix before the corpse at a funeral, and in later years liked to hear Mass celebrated at midnight in the Grande Chartreuse; but he was repelled by the suppression of reason called for by Catholicism, English or Roman. He disliked the Tractarian movement, was angrily insistent on the right of individual private judgment, and wrote sarcastically to Isa Blagden about the Pope 'excogitating dogmas'. Besides this he saw that there was a humanity and a love in the non-conformist practice generally missing from the arid class-consciousness of Anglicanism. For the greater part of his life he was a subjective idealist within a frame-work of Evangelical Christianity.

To the orthodox Mrs Orr his Christianity was questionable, and she argued tenaciously in the pages of the *Contemporary* against what she called his 'gospel of uncertainty'. The practising clergy, borrowing his effective support for their sermons, have always (and much more readily than with Wordsworth) admitted his claim to be a Christian. It is true that on one occasion, being challenged in the course of an argument, 'Are you not a Christian?' he roared out an impatient 'No!', but more than one explanation of this can be imagined. As a rule he maintained the opposite position. It was 'as a Christian' that he protested against Byron's assertion of the soul's nothingness. In the *Essay on Shelley* he wrote, 'I call Shelley a moral man . . . had he lived he would have finally ranged himself with the Christians'. It was his limited acceptance of Christ that offended Mrs Orr. He believed in Christ as 'mystically or by actual miracle a manifestation of divine love', but not

as divine love itself. He said, 'The Life and Death of Christ (though they may be a fiction) supply something which the humanity of Christians requires, and are true for them'.

But it is a man's relation to God that determines his religion, and by this criterion Browning was profoundly religious. He not only believed in God but was personally aware of Him. The central fact of his theology was an unshakeable conviction of his own direct relation with God. Here again Mrs Orr was dissatisfied with the ways of her hero-protégé: she found Browning's God too familiar and anthropomorphic. Perhaps it needed to be this to be the living and joyous thing it was. In the *Letters* he told Elizabeth of his 'life of wonders, with God's hand over all', and of 'God, whose finger I see in every moment of my life'; and all through his life he was quick to see the intervention of Providence. And he extended—why should he not?—the conclusions of his personal experience to cover the general life. He saw evidence of divine power everywhere, and of divine love in the passion of Christ. He wrote in 1864, 'I see ever more reason to hold by the hope in the power and love of God'. His creed—religious, political, personal—had for its first principle the need for the union of power and love.

All this bears so much external resemblance to orthodox Christianity that Mr Havelock Ellis (*From Marlowe to Shaw*, p. 209) finds it possible and proper to sneer at Browning for borrowing and keeping his father's non-conformist churchmanship. This is obtuse, both as to the value of Browning's starting-point and as to the validity of his development, which was both continuous and organic. The man who, having been deprived of religious teaching in his childhood, has to construct a religion within the narrow limits of his own mind and a single lifetime, and has moreover to start building without foundation, to take off from nowhere, is likely to produce something at worst ramshackle, at best fantastic. The best results will come when, for a thinking man, a groundwork is provided of a faith that has been found, over the centuries, adequate to the requirements of the generality of people among whom he is born; out of which there slowly grows a personal faith, fed by experience, trained by criticism, flowering in freedom. This is precisely what happened with Browning, and while the position at which he arrived left problems to be solved by the twentieth and later centuries, it was as good, in breadth and height, as anything the nineteenth century had to show.

'I have had a letter from Robert Browning . . . king of the mystics',

wrote Elizabeth at the beginning of 1845, and one rather wonders at her use of the word. There had been little, if anything, that could be called 'mystic' in Browning's poetry before that time, and yet she had realized that the mind behind the poetry was mystical in its operation, though not quite in the usual or the complete sense. The essence of the mystical approach lies in its direct contact with spiritual reality. With the true mystic this reality is the Absolute, or God: Browning's contact was with that lesser or derivative spiritual reality, the human soul: he knew the cosmic spirit at one remove, through the microcosm. The absolute of his metaphysics was the individual existence. He laid his mind—a mind made lucent by happiness and vital by loving curiosity—open to the occult influences emanating from human personality, and so achieved mystical knowledge—but not the knowledge of the true mystics. His sense of the spiritual reality of the universe is not that of Carlyle, Plato, Wordsworth: it was perhaps impossible that the full vision should come to one so deeply wedded to his kind.

His method of arriving at knowledge was mystical. He knew immortality by intuition. Writing to Julia Wedgwood in 1864 he tells her that though his temper is inclined to dispute both authoritative tradition and mere wishes of the mind, he reasons upon 'the rare flashes of momentary conviction that come and go in the habitual dusk and doubt of life', and so, taking the result of all this to be indisputable, believes in reunion after death. Some fifteen years later he speaks of finding confirmation for his own 'rare flashes' in those of minds more gifted than his own. 'I know that I myself have been aware of the communication of something more subtle than a ratiocinative process, when the convictions of "genius" have thrilled my soul to its depths.' He instances observations made by Lamb and Buonaparte, and goes on to quote from Dante: 'Thus I believe, thus I affirm, thus I am certain it is, and that from this life I shall pass to another better, there where that Lady lives of whom my soul was enamoured.' This passage from Dante was evidently a prized possession with Browning. He was giving it here by way of consolation to a dying woman who had sought his help, but in the earlier correspondence with Julia Wedgwood he had quoted it apparently as one of the repeated reminders that his fidelity to his 'Lady' was, at least by Julia, not to be tampered with; and he also versified it in *La Saisiaz*. It is significant and characteristic of the man, that the 'revelation', the 'verbal inspiration', which he accepted was that of the poets, not that of the Scriptures.

For Browning, mysticism was involved with morality. In the *Essay on Shelley* he was emphatic that the divinely inspired poet must be free from serious moral blemish. We cannot, he says, love the poetry without loving the poet. Others besides Browning have expressed this view. Milton when he wrote that the poet 'ought himself to be a true poem', Mr Aldous Huxley asserting that 'virtue is a necessary preliminary to the mystic experience'. But Browning carried his conviction to an unusual length. Having early decided from Shelley's poetry that Shelley must have been a good man, tender, sincere, and believing in God, he abandoned both him and his poetry when he found that the facts (about Shelley's conduct towards Harriet Westbrook) were not quite what he had supposed them to be. In 1885, in declining the Presidency of the Shelley Society, he wrote to Furnivall, 'I painfully contrast my opinion of Shelley the *man* and Shelley, well, even the *poet*, with what they were sixty years ago, when I had only his work for a certainty and took his character on trust'. Further light has, on the whole, restored the brightness of Shelley's personal fame, but his most recent biographer is not altogether happy over his treatment of Harriet, though it would never occur to Mr Blunden or any critic of to-day to reduce his admiration for the poetry on these grounds.<sup>1</sup> However, the interesting matter is that Browning believed that the spiritual quality of the universe can be realized only by a man whose life is without serious blemish. A corollary of this view was his feeling that the possession of genius did not carry with it any right to ignore the prime moralities.

It was only in the matter of personal experience that Browning relied on intuition for explanations. To the whole scheme of visible truth he brought his reasoning powers, arriving confidently at results which left his mind at peace. The scientific innovations of the age did not fret him as they did Tennyson. His conclusions on evolution, expounded in a letter to Furnivall in 1881, are easily consonant with more recent thought. He said he was not against Darwin, though he regarded his method of variation unproved and doubtful. The conception of progressive development from senseless matter to organisms, proceeding to the appearance of man, had long been familiar to him. The important thing was to perceive creative intelligence 'acting on matter but not resulting from it', acting moreover independently of time and space,

<sup>1</sup> Or would it? I am not sure that Oscar Wilde's work is not undervalued by reason of disapproval of his conduct.

which were conceptions inapplicable to intellect of another kind than our own. With deity there was an 'everlasting moment of creation'—past, present and future comprised in one and the same condition. But these, he said, were matters with which Darwinism—concerned with the mechanics of life—had nothing to do.

Browning's optimism—a word which I take to mean a vital and reasoned belief that the world is a good rather than a bad place, and that life, though involving contradictions, is not without design, and is well-ordered rather than badly-ordered—Browning's optimism was partly a reflection of his physical health and his happy temperament. But it expressed also his religious and philosophical outlook. There are two religious conditions which provide a basis for happiness. One—almost confined to Roman Catholicism—where the believer has surrendered thought and put himself entirely in the hands of the Church, taking everything on trust, believing and doing exactly what he is told—a patient under mesmeric direction. The other is the more adult condition of the man who has worked out for himself a satisfying relation with God and the universe. This we have seen Browning had done, arriving at a personally modified Christianity. He was a man of faith, and he constantly found his vivid and joyous faith confirmed by experience. In middle life when he realized that he was beginning to break out of the shadow of Tennyson's popularity, he declared his intention to go on his own way, pleasing himself and 'thus, I hope, pleasing God'—which calls to mind Dostoevsky's Elder who said that a man who was completely happy must be doing God's will. In the last years of his life he was still glorying in sunrise rather than sunset. The music of his nature was tuned to the note of hope, and annihilation was with him an inadmissible thought. He told William Sharp, 'Death is life—death is change, growth. I deny death as the end of everything. Never say of me that I am dead.' If he cultivated happiness, it was because he believed that happiness was a virtue to be cultivated. Whether he intended Pippa's brief and beautiful couplet to be taken as his thought or hers, we are assured by Mrs Orr that 'the last word of Browning's experience was that of Pippa's faith—

*'God's in his Heaven,—  
All's right with the world!'*

In these mid-twentieth-century years optimism is held in contempt

as one of the forms of 'escapism', and indeed there have always been many who found Browning's attitude to life and its problems irritatingly hearty. Those problems he was apt to deny: at least he made them take their place, would not let them shut out the sunlight. For many sensitive souls the extent of human suffering precludes belief in the goodness of God, a belief which is indispensable to optimism: Browning prevented the problem of suffering from assuming this disastrous magnitude by the only legitimate means, by dwelling on the other side of the picture, so frequently overlooked—the wide extent of human happiness. Seeing his own life as a miraculous sequence, he assumed that others might find the hand of God in their own lives if they cared to look. Part of his success lay in the fact that he not only held the upward-looking philosophy but lived it intensely, so that his life's experience grew to a deepening conviction. If dissatisfaction be the measure of a soul's worth, Browning must be written off as shallow; but how if it were rather the measure of the soul's inertia, dullness, lack of enterprise? Life presents the immortal spirit with obvious limitations, but there is Shakespearian warrant for finding infinite space in a nutshell.

No one can read Browning and suppose that he underestimated the evil element in human nature. But what impressed him more was the wonder of simple goodness. He even felt that evil was somehow necessary to good—that evil and good were not so much antithetical as complementary, each requisite for completion. This seems to me an evasion, and it perhaps belongs only to his later years. There is a similar change in his view of sin. He said of Elizabeth that she was 'a living denial of that doctrine of original sin to which her Christianity pledged her'. This surely implies a rejection by Browning himself of the 'doctrine' (bred by Calvin out of St Augustine, and no longer, I believe, forming an essential part of Christian teaching outside the Roman Church). But later he wrote (in *Gold Hair*) that one of his reasons for accepting Christianity was that it aimed a dart

*At the head of a lie—taught Original Sin,  
The Corruption of Man's Heart.*

(The 'lie' was presumably man's responsibility for his own wrongdoing, the denial of which would seem quite foreign to Browning's general attitude.) He knew that in man, especially political man, 'the plating



wears through, and out comes the copper-head of human nature, weakness and falseness too'. But when a really cynical picture of society made its appearance, in *Vanity Fair*, he agreed with his wife that the novel was 'very clever, very effective, but cruel to human nature . . . a painful book, and not the pain that exalts . . . partial truths, and those not wholesome'.

Over one 'sin' Browning showed a quite remarkable obtuseness. In the *Letters* he argued at great length and with considerable irrelevance that there was something necessary and good in the duelling code (which was, in fact, already *démodé*). His position—if it can be called such—was that if one is a member of society one must obey its rules, to which Elizabeth of course retorted that a rule that was obviously wicked (she kept repeating—'you propose to *kill*') must be disobeyed in the interests of true morality, and at last he admitted that she was probably right. His confused thinking was perhaps due simply to the fact that he was a skilled fencer. That he could analyse society to better purpose is shown by his assertion that 'the sin of the world in these days consists in looking on apathetically at the deaths of factory children and the eviction of Irish tenantry'. (So of our age and the road-casualty figures.)

He called himself a Liberal (like all nineteenth-century non-conformists), but to-day would be a left-wing Conservative. He looked with horror on the idea of abolishing the English country-gentleman—'the salt of the earth'—and parted from Gladstone on the Home Rule issue. Indeed, when it is remembered that he also opposed woman suffrage it is strange that he cared to leave *The Lost Leader* in print. In both cases he saw a tendency to anarchy, and order was his word. The sonnet, *Why I am a Liberal*, shows that he used the term with the continental connotation of resistance to tyranny, and was blind to the fact of economic slavery. His interest in Italian freedom was common English form, and quite lacked Elizabeth's passion. But his love for Italy was deep, and while Carlyle was synthesizing German thought Browning was absorbing and interpreting the art and culture of Italy, at the same time supplying his mind with classical Greek. He allowed his wife to describe him as 'a Republican', but was disillusioned, as she was not, by the later manœuvres of the Head of the Second Republic. He sympathised with France in her downfall in 1870, but said she had asked for it by despising the Prussian power, and went on to anticipate Europe of the next century—the effect will be that we shall all be

forced into the Prussian system of turning a nation into a camp'. And we seem to hear voices of our own day in Elizabeth's account of their views of the 1848 revolution: 'We are far from half approving of the work being attempted and done just now by the theorists in Paris. . . . As to communism, surely the practical part of that, the only not dangerous part, is attainable simply by the consent of individuals' (one sighs for her innocence) . . . 'but make a government scheme of even so much and you seem to trench on individual liberty'. \*

Browning was half-way, but only half-way, to being a feminist. He lived in an age when influential women publicly proclaimed that woman's desire was to be inferior to men, and a writer so clear-visioned as Ruskin limited the education of women to that which would enable them to share their husbands' interests. Browning knew that, whether or not this were good for women, it was thoroughly bad for men, since a society in which men feel themselves automatically superior to women makes a healthy sex-relation impossible. He had not that 'chivalrous' attitude that arises out of pity and kindly contempt, yet it was chivalry that made him condemn Shelley. He judged men and women by much the same standards, and was prepared to be critical of one sex as of the other: fond as he and Elizabeth were of Miss Mitford, he allowed her foibles to inspire him to generalize—'She has the usual woman's characteristic of interpreting all according to the personal liking or disliking of the moment: the new acquaintance is a god, and a little later a devil'. He said he would prefer not to see women in Parliament, giving as his reason that 'Parliament seems no place for original and creative minds'—a conclusion which, in complimenting women, seems to acquiesce in chaos.

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The portrait I have attempted to draw of Browning from three angles doubtless shows him, as Miss Naomi Lewis says, 'pleasing rather than extraordinary'. But ought we to expect a poet to be extraordinary? Were Milton, Dryden, Pope, Gray, Wordsworth, Tennyson, Arnold extraordinary men? I think somehow it is the great prose writers who are as unusual in their lives and characters as in their work—consider Swift, Johnson, Lamb, Carlyle, Ruskin. If the fact suggested with regard to poets is indeed a fact, it may be the outcome of the theory I have already mentioned, that poetry is the utterance of a god, who chooses the first human he meets—perhaps a very 'ordinary' person—to be his

instrument. Whether that be so or not, I am convinced that some poets, at all events, are dual personalities. Most of the modern talk about schizophrenia seems to me pure poppycock, but it does appear to be incontrovertible that when a poet goes into his study he becomes an entirely different person from the one who an hour before was discussing the news over eggs and coffee.<sup>1</sup>

And then again—to come closer to our subject—is it not a misuse of language to call ‘Browning an ‘ordinary’ man? I assume the reader to have a tolerably wide circle of acquaintance. Can he point to *one* of them and say he is a man whom everyone finds charming, brilliant and inspiring; whose love for his kind is widespread, and in one instance rose to immortal heights; one who always lived a moral and religious life, and yet was gloriously human; a man of strong, sane intelligence; a man of truth, and courage, and humour? . . . The theorist of to-day, for whom depravity seems to be the norm of behaviour, ought to find the spectacle of a Browning as exciting as Melville’s sailors’ found Moby Dick. Or are we to reserve our wonder for the crank and the sadist?

The question, reduced to its essentials, is this—was Browning not only a good man but also a great man? During the winter of 1950–1 there was a series of broadcast talks on *What is Greatness in Human Character?*—each speaker illustrating his views by a chosen example of a ‘great man’. Afterwards, collating the opinions expressed and illustrated, and sifting them through the coarse mesh of my own beliefs, I came to the conclusion that the elements requisite to the composition of a great man were—intellect, goodness, courage, simplicity and leadership. The last, since it can only be exercised within the limits of opportunity, should probably read ‘potentiality for leadership’. I am inclined

<sup>1</sup> This, of course, brings to mind Henry James’s story, *The Private Life*. James was profoundly intrigued by the quality in Browning, but surely it is no new phenomenon that an elderly poet should appear but a chipped and cracked vessel for the fire of his youthful utterances—something of the same was felt about Wordsworth and Arnold. James’s presentation of the ‘double personality’ in a story (though in the form of a too-too solid *doppel-ganger*) was a much better way of handling it than calling it schizophrenia. I fear I may not be wholly able to conceal my low opinion of Freudian psychology, which is supposed to afford the only new and profitable approach to poetry, but which seems to me little more than the finding of ugly motives and explanations for familiar and sufficiently understood facts in human nature. Mr F. W. Bateson (who has also followed Mr Norman Nicholson in calling the relation between Wordsworth and his sister ‘incestuous’) in *English Poetry: a Critical Introduction*, sees schizophrenia (‘the Victorian disease’) in both Tennyson and Browning. In Tennyson’s case (leaving Browning to Henry James) he demonstrates this by an analysis of *Tears*, *Idle Tears*, in the course of which he suggests that the kisses ‘by hopeless fancy feigned on lips that are for others’ were those which Tennyson would have liked to press on the lips of Hallam but for Hallam being (a) engaged to Emily, (b) dead. Apart from the squalor of this ‘worm’s eye view’ it appears to assume that a poet can imagine nothing that has not formed a literal part of his personal experience.

to say that if 'intellect' is there in the extreme form of genius, that by itself is sufficient to constitute greatness, and the same is true of 'goodness' in the extreme form of saintliness. But the whole picture inevitably suggests Browning. The speaker who chose Thomas Masaryk as his (or her—I think it was Lady Violet Bonham-Carter) specimen-hero insisted that the mark of the great man was that he should have the power to do the impossible—and this again points straight at Browning's handling of the problem of the sofa-ridden Elizabeth.<sup>1</sup> Is further proof necessary? In any case, whether good, or great, or both, or neither, this is the man who wrote the 1500 pages of verse, in double column, to which we are now to turn.

## PART II : THE POET

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### CHAPTER I

## *Passion and thought'*

'SINGING AND SERMONIZING': this was one of the ways in which Browning differentiated the twin functions of poetry, as he saw them, and as he thought he had plainly indicated them by his title, *Bells and Pomegranates*. Both singing and sermonizing are valuable forms of activity, generally kept apart, or at least allocated to different performers. But how if, it being the Precentor's turn to preach, he should climb into the Cathedral pulpit and *sing* the sermon he had laboriously composed (or less laboriously taken from a drawer) on the previous night? Those of his congregation who were not scandalized would be amused, but if the Precentor was in good voice many would afterwards agree that they had derived more enjoyment than usual from the sermon. Precentor Browning loves to preach, and does so often enough in sound pulpit rhetoric—to empty pews; but he knows that he has an excellent gift in singing, so he sometimes sings a sermon and draws a small crowd.

His text, or my text, may be found in that always delightful poem, *Amphibian*, stanzas XI to XIV:

*But sometimes when the weather  
Is blue, and warm waves tempt  
To free oneself of tether,  
And try a life exempt  
From worldly noise and dust,  
In the sphere which overbuds  
With passion and thought,—why, just  
Unable to fly, one swims!  
By passion and thought upborne,  
One smiles to oneself—'They fare  
Scarce better, they need not scorn  
Our sea, who live in the air!'*

*Emancipate through passion  
And thought, with sea for sky,  
We substitute, in a fashion,  
For heaven—poetry.*

There must be something deliberate in the use—thrice repeated and cunningly varied—of the expression ‘passion and thought’, and I am suggesting that these two elements constitute a formula for certain poems which are distinctive of Browning: two elements, separate, not blended into one; passion *and* thought, not passionate thought. Wordsworth, in *The Prelude*, shows us that poetic truth came to him not by the rational processes of thought, but through intuition; and he describes intuition as ‘feeling intellect’, the equivalent of passionate thought. The word ‘feeling’ is not to be connected with emotion or sensation: the instrument of poetic truth is intellect, but intellect must be used with its feeling edge, not its thinking one; the poet’s mind *feels* that certain things are true, and his feeling is a surer guide than reason.

This is familiar ground: the point is that Browning does not always conform, and indicates his point of departure in *Amphibian*. He knows passion—otherwise he would be no poet; his mind is an atomic-furnace of thought: but the passion does not often go into the thought, though it generally (before 1872) goes into the verse. *Amphibian* itself is an example of the kind of poem I have in mind: its substance is figurative, and most fascinatingly so, but the figure is not the thought—it carries the thought as the rope the balancing acrobat. The poem owes the perfection of its form to the fact that it was passionately conceived, but its thesis is argued with calculated precision and thoroughness.

The speaker in the poem, earth-born, and swimming by choice (it is significant that at the age of eighteen Browning ‘chose’ poetry as his lifework), is observing a creature of the air—a butterfly, a soul, the matter of poetry. He will never ‘join its flight’, but has taken an opportunity to do the thing which ‘mimics flight’—‘unable to fly, one swims’—in the sea of verse, whose waves are rhythm. Browning takes the world of flight, heaven, to be one stage above poetry, but for us there is nothing above poetry, the imaginative vision, plumbing all depths and heights. So we must emend his stanza xiv to read:

*Emancipate through passion  
And thought . . .  
We substitute . . .  
For poetry, the 'Browning version',*

a variety of poetry which carries reasoned truth on inspired verse. And completing his self-analysis, Browning goes on to tell how he, the swimmer in this half-aerial medium, has all the time his eye on 'Land the solid and safe, to welcome again (confess!)'—that is, the sheer didacticism of the long prose sermons he so much enjoyed preaching.

This is what Wilde meant (or should have meant) when he allowed that perverse and profound critic 'Gilbert', at the end of a long paragraph which constitutes a penetrating essay on Browning, to conclude his appreciation by declaring that 'the only man who can touch the edge of his garment is George Meredith', and then to add the pitiless epigram, 'Meredith is a prose Browning, and so is Browning'. It is not more true than very witty observations are meant to be: Meredith's mind was subtler than Browning's, his style more artificial, and Browning cannot often be accused of writing 'prose'; but the substance of his thought (in the poems under notice in this chapter) is of a prose nature, and capable of—sometimes calling for—paraphrase.

Consider that very charming poem, *A Pretty Woman*. A lyric, would you call it? No poem could sustain true lyric inspiration under the unyielding compulsion of those triple and double rhymes, cleverly as Browning manages them:

*All's our own, to make the most of, Sweet—  
Sing and say for,  
Watch and pray for,  
Keep a secret or go boast of, Sweet!*

No, it is a dainty essay on the utilitarian value of feminine beauty. This woman has extreme beauty, but little quality of soul. She is made for liking not for love. Do not therefore despise her, but equally do not try to arouse love, or a soul, in her. She has her value—'A sick man sees truer when his hot eyes roll on her'. In other words she is a type of the profound pleasure that all men may get, even a spiritual pleasure, from woman's beauty, as from nature or from music. One is led on to complete the thought: the pleasure is aesthetic, and not to be confused with

the feeling that accompanies love. Perhaps it is the first of three stages—'liking' (Browning's term), romantic love, married love. It is certainly suitable only to a civilized world, where men will be content to stop at the aesthetic pleasure.

The poem invites a treatment one would not and could not give to *La Belle Dame* or *The Solitary Reaper*, where the poet's thought has received a further, final sublimation. In spite of the hindrance offered by the rhymes the form of the poem is exquisitely musical (except for the last three stanzas)—but the music has not absorbed the thought. The poem will perhaps be regarded as too slight to provide adequate support for my proposition. Let us turn to those two more substantial companion-pieces, *Fra Lippo Lippi* and *Andrea del Sarto*, admittedly creative achievements of very high order, great pieces of dramatic characterization. In both poems the blank verse is full of vitality and movement. In *Fra Lippo* it is rougher, as befits the rapid careless excited talk that makes up the poem, and does not rise to the height of Browning's genius in colloquial verse; in *Andrea del Sarto* the verse is more flexible, and less colloquial, the poem being rather a meditation. Each poem has a human setting, most vividly drawn—in *Fra Lippo*'s case the brilliant summary of his life-story, in *del Sarto*'s the marital situation, coming to us through the painter's half-tragic half-humorous hints. But the essential matter of both poems lies in the theories of art expressed by the two artists. There is no reason why this should not be so. The later books of *The Prelude* contain a great deal of Wordsworth's thought on the function of the poet. But it is poetic thought, incorporate with its expression: hardly thought, but experience, 'feeling, intuition:

*A meditation rose in me that night  
Upon the lonely mountain when the scene  
Had passed away, and it appeared to me  
The perfect image of a mighty mind,  
Of one that feeds upon infinity,  
That is exalted by an underpresence,  
The sense of God, or whatsoe'er is dim  
Or vast in its own being . . .*

Fra Lippo's ideas are separable. He voices the gospel of realism. He scoffs at the way his contemporaries (like some of our contemporaries)



aim to 'paint soul by painting body ill'. He deduces his right to paint the world and its inhabitants as he sees them from the fact that God made them so. He explains the function of art as that of making us see and love things better through their artistic representation—to find the meaning of the world, reality behind actuality. So del Sarto wonders if it may not be possible that the higher vision should co-exist with an inferior degree of artistic skill. He admits that a placid and accomplished art may be a sign of an end too easily reached. He asserts—against *Fra Lippo*—that beauty must have mind behind it before it can inspire true art. He demonstrates to Lucrezia—tenderly but without flinching—the relation between art and marriage. . . . It seems ungracious to dissect poems of such unquestioned charm, and indeed there is a great deal of lovely human material besides in each of them, but whatever its nature the material is not qualitatively different from what it would have been as the subject of a prose rendering. Browning was primarily a thinker, and would not have understood Keats's prayer for 'a world of sensation rather than of thought'. He 'chose poetry' because he felt his thought was valuable, requisite to be given to the world, and given more arrestingly in verse, for which he knew he had a very unusual gift. A large proportion of his poetry consists of his reflections, sometimes bare and bald, sometimes buried beneath masses of verbal débris, more often clothed in his own individual kind of rich and varied verse.

Two remarkable instances of this third variety are to be seen in *Bishop Blougram's Apology* and *Mr Sludge, 'The Medium'*. *Blougram* will call for separate treatment under the religious poetry, but *Sludge* (an undervalued poem)<sup>1</sup> is perhaps the supreme example of Browning thinking aloud in admirable verse—verse which in the second half of the poem rises to genius, whence its inclusion in this chapter. We are bound to find the dramatic opening to the monological argument amateurish compared with the brilliance of *Blougram's* lead, for *Sludge* is no urbane dignitary, and 'No, don't, sir! Don't expose me! Just this once!' is appropriate, but we could have spared

Go tell, then! Who the devil cares  
What such a rowdy chooses to . . .

Air—aie—aie!

Please, sir, your thumbs are through my windpipe, sir!  
Ch—ch!

<sup>1</sup> Mr Cohen is sadly unappreciative of its merits: 'Chesterton realized its 'inspired utterance'.

though the scene doubtless owes something to the actual one when Browning is said to have thrown Home (or Hume) out of the house.

But when Sludge begins his discourse—with a ruminative

*Fol-lol-the-rido-liddle-iddle-ol!*

*You see, sir . . .*

the defence he puts up is at least as good as Blougram's. And a good deal of credit is due to Browning for his breadth of mind, since in both situations his own views were in violent opposition\* to those he was uttering through the mouths of his puppets. Sludge begins with the parable of the pantry-boy who is kicked out for assuming that the possession of a five-pound note admits him to society but believed and encouraged when he claims to be in touch with the supernatural. He declares that a medium is so forcibly incited by his patrons that it is impossible for him *not* to invent phenomena: if he makes an obvious mistake they explain it away for him, 'doubt' is forbidden because it spoils the séance. The satire is savagely pointed, and one remembers that Elizabeth, if not a 'patron' a hopeful inquirer, was only three years dead.<sup>1</sup>

Sludge pretends to be ashamed to think how the society-folk have bought his soul and gained the right to treat him as 'only a medium', something out of nature, a freak. They call him 'pet'—and here I think Browning's memories begin to stir him to anger. He makes Sludge say,

*Hear these simpletons,  
That's all I ask—before my work's begun, .  
Before I've touched them with my finger-tip!  
Thus they await me (do but listen, now!  
It's reasoning, this is—I can't imitate  
The baby-voice, though)—'In so many tales  
Must be some truth . . .*

The satire grows still more bitter when he comes to the sceptical philosophers who attend séances for amusement—'Men emasculate, blank of belief, who played, as eunuchs use, with superstition safely' (this hardly sounds like Sludge), and, in two passages which might almost seem to be directed against Browning himself,

<sup>1</sup> De Vane thinks the poem was written in 1859-60 but not shown to Elizabeth—the latter I think we can be sure of

*Your literary man,  
Who draws his kid gloves on to deal with Sludge,*

and later,

*A more hateful form of foolery—  
The social sage's—Solomon of saloons  
And philosophic diner-out.*

Up to this point, half-way through the poem, the indictment has been drawn against the audience, the spiritualists, encouragers of the weakly-dishonest medium. Now with far greater effect and originality Browning turns his eyes on to the soul of the medium. At the question 'Never mind your public--what about God?' Sludge draws himself up and begins with high seriousness to expound his philosophy. One is reminded of the dying speech of Shaw's Dubedat, but here we have something more than a brief defiant credo. It is difficult to suppose that the ruffian who speaks the last thirty lines of the poem, after his interlocutor has gone, would be capable of either the philosophizing or its poetic form—for in this second part we approach that fusion of form and content which brings about the miracle of poetry.<sup>1</sup> It is Browning putting up a new defence, a brilliant lawyer pleading for an inarticulate prisoner at the bar. From an attack on the medium's environment, his 'extenuating circumstances', counsel turns to a psychological examination of his mental and spiritual state as imaginatively conceived; possibilities rather than what one can think to be humanly likely. Sludge is made to start from the quite tenable position, 'I can't be sure but there was something in it, tricks and all'. From here he strikes straight off into speculation—there is a spiritual world parallel with ours: may it not be possible to communicate with it? For which purpose, may not certain people be born with a spirit-sense, as others are with a colour-sense? What do we know? Things happen—the immediate cause is plain, but behind the immediate cause may be unseen agencies. Most people have observed instances of the supernatural, but they put them aside as unimportant: I, Sludge, put them before everything else—'the grain of gold' won from 'the dirty rest of life'. He suggests that he is exceptionally open to signs from the other world:

<sup>1</sup> Raymond finds 'a great dearth of poetry' in *Sludge*, but cannot have read on with patience and sympathy

*Say I was born with flesh so sensitive,  
Soul so alert, that, practice helping both,  
I guess what's going on outside the veil—  
Just a prisoned crane feels pairing-time  
In the islands where his kind are, so must fall  
To capering by himself some shiny night . . .*

A mere tap on the wall and I am all attention—you others want to see the door open. I see spirit everywhere—and 'think myself the more religious man'.

*Religion's all or nothing; it's no mere smile  
O' contentment, sigh of aspiration, sir—  
.....rather, stuff  
Of the very stuff, life of life, self of self.*

You must be 'wisely passive' to the influences (Sludge often quotes Shakespeare; he might have quoted Wordsworth here, but goes on):

*Be lazily alive,  
Open-mouthed, like my friend the ant-eater,  
Letting all nature's loosely-guarded motes  
Settle and, slick, be swallowed!*

He admits that it probably seems absurd to suppose such things could come to him, Sludge. It used to be correct to divide mankind into great and small, but the outlook is changing:

*Well, sir, the old way's altered somewhat since,  
And the world wears another aspect now:  
Somebody turns our spy-glass round, or else  
Puts a new lens in it: grass, worm, fly, grow big!  
.....Talk of mountains now?  
We talk of mould that heaps the mountains, mites  
That throng the mould, and God that makes the mites.  
The Name comes close behind a stomach-cyst. . . .*

He sums up:

*Sludge knows and sees and hears a hundred things  
You all are blind to—I've my taste of truth,  
Likewise my touch of falsehood—vice, no doubt,  
But you've your vices also—I'm content. . . .  
.....I've told my lie  
And seen truth follow.*

In fact he feels himself a public benefactor. To most people the world is dead, dull, futile:

*Give it me! I slap it brisk  
With harlequin's pasteboard sceptre: what's it now?  
Changed like a rock-flat, rough with rusty weed,  
At first wash-over o' the returning wave!  
All the dry dead impracticable stuff  
Starts into life and light again; this world  
Pervaded by an influx from the next.*

He may lie, but he lies, like the poets, creatively.

It is all immensely plausible, and if Browning wiped out the effect by the bathos of the conclusion it was perhaps to show that the defence has been of his own concocting—to make sure we do not suppose Sludge or Home could have done it or was worth it. The fact remains that this is a better satire and a more convincing apology than *Blougram*. Its philosophy of a spirit-world, with the possibility of senses tuned to it; the reality of miracles and other mystic evidence; the wise passiveness to the supernatural or strange—all this is done in a vein of high eloquence often reaching poetic heights. It is an outstanding example of Browning's way of digging greatness out of a muddy soul, and of a thought-process clothed (as to its latter half) in inspired verse without ceasing to be a thought-process.

Had it not been for the personal application, Browning ought to have got a deal of fun out of writing *Sludge*. But having 'chosen poetry', he apparently did not always find it fun. On 12th March 1845—by which date he had written (besides other less joy-inducing pieces) *Pauline*, *Pippa Passes*, the *Cavalier Tunes*, *The Pied Piper*, *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon*—he told Elizabeth in a letter, 'I have no pleasure in writing myself—none in the mere act, though all pleasure in the sense of fulfilling a duty. . . . But I think you like the operation of writing as I

should like that of painting or making music.' Elizabeth's reply is illuminating:

Like to write? Of course, of course I do. I seem to live while I write—it is life, for me. Why, what is to live? Not to eat and drink and breathe—but to feel the life in you down all the fibres of being, passionately and joyfully. And thus one lives in composition surely—not always—but when the wheel goes round and the procession is uninterrupted. Is it not so with you? Oh, it must be so. . . .

She was comparing the life of composition with her other muted life of invalidism, he with the full-blooded life that was his normal existence. He wrote again, in 1846, 'My poetry is far from the "completest expression of my being"', and maintained the attitude throughout, for in 1863 he said in a letter to Isa Blagden, 'I wrote a poem of 130 lines yesterday, and mean to keep writing whether I like it or not', while in 1864 we find him repeating the 'duty' motive laid down in 1845: 'I feel such comfort and delight in doing the best I can with my own object of life, poetry (which I think I never could have seen the good of before).' The surprising thing is that under this minor compulsion the achievement should have been so splendid. But if, in the circumstances, it included much that is not poetry at all, and some—the matter of this chapter—that is incompletely poetry, the explanation possibly lies in the attitude just indicated. Browning was a first-class human being, and had a first-class mind, and whatever work he had chosen to do he would have done superlatively well. (The history of the nineteenth century might have been different if he had entered, as he nearly did, the diplomatic service.) He chose poetry, but poetry did not choose him and as a result some of his best poems show the poetic faculty in incomplete control. The voice and the medium are those of a poet, but the thought is distinguishably that of a moralist or a philosopher. The statement that form and content are inseparable is true only of pure poetry.

Browning had announced his adherence to the principle behind this species of poetry quite early in his career and long before he versified it in *Amphibian*. In explaining the significance of his collective title, *Bell and Pomegranates*, he said it stood for 'music and discoursing, sound and sense, poetry and thought', and the disjuncture had made its appearance

even earlier, in *Paracelsus*. Specimens continue to crop up at wide intervals as far as *Pacchiarotto*, after which (i.e. during the last twelve years) the poems are all either pure narrative or pure didactic, with an occasional lift into lyric. The nature of the category may be further illustrated by a comparison between three poems having for theme the first impact of the idea of the Incarnation on the mind of an unbeliever—an Arab, a Persian and a Greek: the *Epistle of Karshish*, which has true lyric force, *The Sun* (in *Ferishtah's Fancies*), which is metrical prose, and *Cleon*, which is 'amphibious'. In *The Sun* the argument proceeds entirely on its own feet, being set to verse because its author is a professional writer of verse but rather hindered than helped by the medium:

The sun rose high. 'During our ignorance'—  
Began *Ferishtah*—'folk esteemed as God  
Yon orb: for argument, suppose him so,—  
Be it the symbol, not the symbolized,  
I and thou safelier take upon our lips. . . .

In *Cleon* the verse is inspired, but the argument is still a prose one:

We struggle, fain to enlarge  
Our bounded physical recipiency,  
Increase our power, supply fresh oil to life,  
Repair the waste of age and sickness: no,  
It skills not! life's inadequate to joy,  
As the soul sees joy, tempting life to take.

In *Karshish*, verse and theme are cast in one mould. Browning feels poetically the revelation that has come to the Arab physician, and his feeling enters into the drive of the verse: the thought moves on the verse as a bird on its wings. The thought is passionate, and is not open to argument. To realize this fully requires that the poem should be read as a whole, but the concluding lines afford a good sample of the lyric unity:

The very God! think, Abib; dost thou think?•  
So, the All-great, were the All-loving too—  
So, through the thunder comes a human voice  
Saying, 'O heart I made, a heart beats here!

*Face, my hands fashioned, see it in myself!  
 Thou hast no power, nor mayst conceive of mine,  
 But love I gave thee, with myself to love,  
 And thou must love me who have died for thee!  
 The madman saith He said so: it is strange.*

Some of these 'amphibious' poems are written in a form that suggests lyric, yet they are amenable to separation into the two elements. I need not name all of them, but two which rather surprised me by turning up in this class were *The Last Ride Together* and *St Martin's Sumner*.

*The Last Ride* is a good example of the passion and thought parallelism, serving to show once more how excellent the combination may be, for no amount of analysis can rob this poem of the deservedly high place it holds with Browning devotees. It shows the theme that was lyrically handled in *The Lost Mistress* elevated into an intellectual treatment of disappointed love. The stanza form is admirable: it keeps the continuous sense of riding far better than the dreadfully repetitive 'As I ride, as I ride' of *Through the Metidja* with its ghastly single rhyme; and the last, almost detached line of the stanza is used epigrammatically:

*Who knows but the world may end tonight!  
 Sing, riding's a joy! For me, I ride.*

I could wish the third stanza away: it shows that the lady gave more than was asked for, which was supposed to be enough—"Thus lay she a moment on my breast"—in which connection the epithet 'billowy-bosomed' (though occurring in the cloud simile) strikes me as unfortunate. The remaining two-thirds of the poem are plain reflection, the thoughts of the lover as he rides. The thoughts are not concerned with his mistress, but with a philosophy of failure, building up to Browning's pet conception of a compensatory after-life: the lover concludes that it is well for him not to have found sublime happiness in love—he is the more certain of happiness in heaven. The last stanza, as well as the first, is pure lyric, with form triumphant—imaginative truth, rhythmic feeling, symbolic beauty.

*And yet—she has not spoke so long!  
 What if heaven be that, fair and strong  
 At life's best, with our eyes upturned*



Whither life's flower is first discerned,  
 We, fixed so, ever should so abide?  
 What if we still ride on, we two  
 With life for ever old yet new,  
 Changed not in kind but in degree,  
 The instant made eternity,—  
 And heaven just prove that I and she  
 Ride, ride together, for ever ride?

*St Martin's Summer* is a very different story. It comes late, and is one of Browning's cryptic poems. De Vane sees in it a reflection of the Ashburton affair,<sup>1</sup> but the hints afforded by the poem seem to me to have a less particular reference, though the theme is infidelity in love. If the poem has a personal bearing it may contain Browning's sense of the permanence of Elizabeth against the flickering lights of later attractions, but Lady Ashburton herself is not indicated, unless possibly in the title, which itself is contradicted by the fourth stanza—'You are young, my princess, I am hardly older'. The theme is the lesser love—romantic love, love that dies, and so prefers for dwelling-place a temporary tent not a durable house, especially if there have been earlier loves, the ghosts of which walk and make the new love uneasy. The ghosts, memories, will be less disturbing if we, the lovers, merely join the procession, claim nothing more than to be fleeting ghosts ourselves. Yet we are not dead, or ghosts; we are alive and loving: we should indeed have died with the first love, but in the renewal of love we snatch a day from death. Then, at stanza xv, the whole force of remembered love comes back, and shows the lover he is indeed dead. The new love only had meaning in sustaining the memory of the old. So there shall not be even a tent—the relationship must end abruptly: it has already been fatal in destroying, by disloyalty, that first love.

This deathless intensity and compulsion of remembered love brings to mind a place where the same passion is presented with stark simplicity, and therefore with a much more deeply moving effect—in such poems of Hardy as *The Supplanter* and *The Phantom*. Browning's complex stanza form and determined economy of phrase make it almost impossible that this poem should move the reader as lyric should, but the verse has the 'amphibious' degree of beauty.

<sup>1</sup> De Vane's admirable *Handbook* is as full of Lady Ashburton's finger-prints as modern Wordsworth criticism is of Annette's.

There are less than a score of this kind of quasi-lyric, in which reasoning or reflection is given poetic utterance without being in itself made into the stuff of poetry (as it is for instance in Coleridge's *Frost at Midnight* and Arnold's *The Future*). All the poems are striking and characteristic, and I suggest that Browning made a success of his new species, which stands in his poetry between genuine lyric like *By the Fire-side* and downright didactic like most of the later verse. All the poems provide evidence not only of their author's strong and active mind but of his genius in words and metre. They are poems we would not willingly spare from the annals of English literature, but they are not poems in the full lyric sense. This is the poetry of ideas, and the ideas have not been transmuted into music and feeling; the thought is analytical not creative; it remains a mental product, deeply interesting but without the sanction of the imaginative vision.

I should not have given the title of *Amphibian* to this book on the strength of a small minority of poems. The bi-partisan species was always a possibility with Browning. He was a poet to the complete exclusion of the moralist only in the lyrics of the 1842, 1845 and 1855 volumes (*Dramatic Lyrics*, *Dramatic Romances*, *Men and Women*), and not always there. He sometimes mistook cerebration for the imaginative dream. Natural history provides quite a number of amphibious creatures; in the history of English poetry I am not aware of any writer other than Browning who has this dual or undecided quality. The lyricists, like Keats, are lyrical; the didactics, like Crabbe, are unpoetical; when Wordsworth is writing poetry he is not moralizing, when he moralizes it is not in poetry. Browning alone is capable, even while the verse-instinct is raising the temperature of his medium to singing point, of subjecting his theme to logical analysis and presenting it as an intellectual argument. It is not only that he is free of two elements: he can live in both at once. The lobes of his brain have two different functions, and they both function together. The term 'amphibious' or 'amphibian' does not express the quality with any exactness: I call him, or this book, *Amphibian* because the poem of this name is typical of this highly individual aspect of his genius. (See the note on Paul de Reul's book on page 312.)

## CHAPTER II

# 'Lyric love'

### I

I HAVE SEPARATED out a small but characteristic part of Browning's poetry in which the poems are like cherries, each with a kernel of prosaic meaning hidden beneath a sweet and beautiful envelope of inspired verse. For the rest, Browning's work comprises lyric at one end and didactic at the other, with, in between, and overlapping both, a great mass of narrative. So to consider next his lyric poetry.

The question at once arises as to whether Browning is a lyric poet at all, whether he ever surrenders himself, as a lyric poet must, wholly to the mystic revelation and the power of form. For lyric in the full sense, both elements must be present at once and inseparably, the mystic revelation inducing lyric form, and the lyric form both inducing and conveying the revelation, the result being a poem which enforces its acceptance in silence and delight, and perhaps satisfies the physical criterion known as 'Housman's razor'. And it has to be said that Browning is not often a lyric poet in this sense. Take the best known of Pippa's songs:

*The year's at the spring  
And day's at the morn;  
Morning's at seven,  
The hill-side's dew-pearled;  
The lark's on the wing;  
The snail's on the thorn;  
God's in his heaven--  
All's right with the world!*

It is a gem of poetry, exquisitely cut, flashing with the light of truth. Put it beside some other verse brevities from the true lyric poets. Tennyson:

*For a breeze of morning moves,  
And the planet of love is on high;*

Wordsworth:

✓ The silence that is in the starry sky,  
The sleep that is among the lonely hills;

de la Mare:

*Lofty and few the elms, the stars  
In the vast boughs most bright;  
I stood a dreamer in a dream  
In the unstirring night;*

Shakespeare:

*Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea,  
But sad mortality o'ersways their power,  
How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea,  
Whose action is no stronger than a flower?*

The Browning song says perfectly everything that it wants to say; all the others suggest far more than they say, and leave the mind echoing with the unutterable; and they do this by something inexplicable in their form. Moreover, the *Pippa* lines are not by any means received with universal silent acceptance. They have brought comfort to thousands, but in others they rouse a blind fury. This is not simply due to controversial implications. The line

*Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting,*

does not correspond with the beliefs of most readers of Wordsworth, but by the time we have reached that point in the *Ode* disbelief has been effectively suspended; the line

*In sua voluntate e nostra pace,*

awakes no sense of contradiction in those who are not of Dante's faith.

Browning himself was partially aware of the dilemma. While he was busy with *Men and Women* he wrote to a friend, 'I am writing lyrics with more music and painting than before'. The effort was not without result, as the marvellous poems of the period show. Nevertheless Browning did not quite understand the position. (It was impossible that

he should: no poet is conscious of his relation to form.) He was merely hoping to conciliate his public by removing some of the cacophony which had been charged against his verse. But 'music', as a synonym for poetic form and the essence of lyric, is not just mellifluousness. In Donne poetic form is often associated with an uncompromising bareness of rhythm, and in Keats the choice and patterning of words is, more than rhythm, the basis of his lyric genius. Of music in the sense that the music is itself the meaning of a poem, beyond the meaning of the words, and inexpressible except in the sound and movement of the poem—of this Browning knew little. Nor does he use words with a sense of their being mysterious instruments to an end beyond prose.

*Oh, to be in England  
Now that April's there! . . .*

The poem is much loved, and sometimes now deprecated. Mr Dobree and Miss Batho, complaining of Browning's use of photographic detail, instance the brush-wood sheaf round the elm tree bole. But if exactness is a crime, it is here atoned for by the larger truth contained in the word 'unaware'; and Browning was also capable of the Turner sea-scape, anything but photographic, in the second set of home-thoughts, 'from the sea'. It seems obtuse to deny that the first stanza of *Home-Thoughts from Abroad* is a burst of pure lyric, with its varied and beautifully calculated line, its cunning repetitions, and its chaffinch singing on the orchard bough. The second does degenerate into natural description (and even at that I seem never to have heard a thrush, however wise, singing each song twice over), and the absence of word magic becomes apparent if one recalls phrases from another bird-poem—'light-winged Dryad of the trees', 'verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways', 'high requiem', 'perilous seas', 'plaintive anthem'.

Beautiful words—beauty itself: Browning's devotion is not quite single. He is not troubled by beauty (as Mr John Masefield, a much lesser poet, notably is). That ranging curiosity and appetite for mortal life which seem to show him a rebirth from the Renaissance kept him outside those withdrawn regions of the mind where beauty is seen as a disturbing symbol of eternity. Solitude did not mean as much to him as it has done to most poets. The comparative solitude of the months he and Elizabeth spent at Bagni di Lucca helped to restore his mind, so badly shaken by the death of his mother, and after Elizabeth's own death

he sought the peace of a lonely part of the French coast before coming home to England. But in neither case was the solitude complete, or possessed of that spiritual content which brought to Wordsworth 'impulses of deeper birth'. Two years after Elizabeth's death he wrote to Isa Blagden from Pornic, 'If I could I would stay just as I am for many a day. I feel out of the earth sometimes as I sit here at the window, with the little church, a field, a few houses, and the sea . . . such a soft sea, and such a mournful wind'. He wrote *Janus Lee's Wife* here, but the 'solitary' part of the poem, about the wind that would still be ailing, and moaned like a lost dog, was written nearly thirty years earlier.

The clearest indication that Browning enjoyed at least mental solitude comes from a letter to Isa Blagden in 1866, where he tells her that he always found the Italians individually uninteresting, without the capacity for originating thought. They *are* poetry, he said, but cannot *make* poetry. And he went on, 'My liking for Italy was always a selfish one—I felt alone with my own soul there. Here (in London) there are hundreds even of my acquaintance who do habitually walk up and down in the lands of thought I live in . . . I never saw footprint of an Italian there yet . . . I should like to have earned a few years of that sort of solitude.' But the full fruit of 'that sort of solitude', of being 'alone with his own soul', never came to him.

To those who preferred his poetry to his wife's he said, 'You are wrong, quite wrong. She has genius; I am only a painstaking fellow. Can't you imagine a clever sort of angel who plots and plans and tries to build up something—he wants to make you see it as he sees it—shows you one point of view, carries you off to another, hammering into your head the thing he wants you to understand; and whilst this bother is going on God Almighty turns you off a little star—that's the difference between us. The true creative power is hers, not mine.' This was in 1861, before Elizabeth's death, and ten years later he said again, '*She* was the poet—remember her limited experience of all kinds, and what she made of it'. (That last is a criterion of the first importance.) A little prejudiced, one way and the other, but it shows that Browning knew what was what where poetry is concerned.

It is with a sigh of genuine relief (which I hope the reader will echo) that I stop talking about Browning as if he were a second-rate poet. There is

nothing second-rate about him, and wherever he stands, though it may not be with Chaucer, Milton and Wordsworth, he stands there in his own right, without need for apology. Perhaps not born great (in poetry), he achieved greatness in song and story, in the delineation of man and the adventure of his soul. I propose now to look at Browning's achievement in lyric poetry, dealing separately with those poems which have love for their theme.

Browning began with lyric, and if we divide his writing life into two equal halves, the first ending with the publication of *Men and Women* in 1855 (when he was forty-three), three-quarters of his lyric production lies, as was to be expected, within the first half. *Pauline*, which is inspired by lyric feeling and moves to a lyric rhythm throughout, has been compared to *The Prelude*, and there are a few Wordsworthian echoes among the faintly Shelleyan imagery and verse:

*I felt as one beloved, and so shut in  
From fear: and thence I date my trust in signs  
And omens, for I saw God everywhere. . . .*

*So, as I grew, I rudely shaped my life  
To my immediate wants; yet strong beneath  
Was a vague sense of power . . .*

*My powers were greater: as some temple seemed  
My soul . . .*

Apart from this its only resemblance to *The Prelude* is that it was, Browning tells us, conceived as an introductory poem to an ambitious series: he says he abandoned or forgot the plan, otherwise there would be no difficulty in seeing *Paracelsus* and *Sordello* as two stages in its completion. He also declares that *Pauline* was, like the later work, 'dramatic in principle', and indeed the psychological exposures (almost as exaggerated as Bunyan's) present a figure remarkably unlike the young confident care-free and heart-free Browning of the biographical records. At the same time it must be admitted that a calm exterior may conceal a troubled mind, and as the distressed young man of the poem empties his soul's pockets for the silent wonderment of *Pauline* we recognize some of the contents as belonging to the Browning we know—his Greek, his interest in the stage, his beloved Polidoro, his 'trust in signs and omens', his speculations on the poet's function. On the other

hand the line, 'Thou seest then my aimless, hopeless state', does not seem to apply (and it is interesting to remember that it was these very qualities that the poet disavowed at the end of his life—'Like the aimless, hopeless, helpless did I drivel?'). Moreover, Pauline's interlocutor is suggested as an older, perhaps a dying, man; and there are other features not readily recognizable. For Pauline herself, she seems less likely to be a portrait of Eliza Flower than a French dry-point of the idealized girl-friend whom every young man likes to imagine listening for ever to his eloquent recital of the story of his heart.<sup>1</sup> The passage in which the penitent speaks of unlocking the sleepless brood of fancies from his soul:

*Thou art so good,  
So calm—if thou should'st wear a brow less light  
For some wild thought which, but for me, were kept  
From out thy soul . . .*

this seems to refer to an episode in which the boy Browning frightened Eliza's sister Sarah by explaining to her his religious fears and scruples.

Something in the nature of spiritual autobiography we can safely take the poem to be, and only its being so could explain Browning's grief and rage at Mill's discovery of 'intense and morbid self-consciousness' in the representation. The word 'morbid' is certainly misapplied. These turns and twists of a hunted soul are dramatized, and Browning was far too healthy-minded at twenty-one not to enjoy watching the result. Autobiography or not, *Pauline* is unquestionably lyrical. And this not only in the 'detached passages' in which alone Birrell, in his introductory note, sees 'charm'. The whole poem is a sustained lyrical chant. It does indeed rise constantly in waves of outstanding beauty, but singing quality is more continuous here than in any other poem of comparable length except *Pompilia* in *The Ring and the Book*. The narrative is confused, but by reason of its unifying lyrical power the reader is moved to a sympathetic understanding of the speaker's turbulent inner life. This 'supposed confession' of a far from 'second-rate sensitive mind' would provide ample material for a psychologist, who would complain of the absence of information about a 'sex-life', but would find several passages which he could distort to supply his needs.

<sup>1</sup> There is little to recommend the American fancy that Pauline stands for the spirit of poetry.



It falls into four parts: i—his remorse and need for confession; ii—the history of his soul to date; iii—a possible solution to his problems, in a flight to nature with Pauline; iv—a return of the sense of sin, alleviated by the love and beauty of Pauline and by the love of God: so he regains happiness.

*Pauline, mine own, bend o'er me—thy soft breast  
 'Shall pant to mine—bend o'er me—thy sweet eyes,  
 And loosened hair and breathing lips, and arms  
 Drawing me to thee—these build up a screen  
 To shut me in with thee, and from all fear;  
 So that I might unlock the sleepless brood  
 Of fancies from my soul . . .*

Only so can he recapture his power of song. He has had wild dreams of beauty and good, but now he feels 'aimless and hopeless'. He reminds Pauline how once before he had come to her:

*One warm morn when winter  
 Crept aged from the earth, and spring's first breath  
 Blew soft from the moist hills;*

and she then had banished his despair. Now he would be content to feel 'low indeed' if he could be restored to hope and belief in goodness. He has been deliberately self-indulgent, believing he might still remain strong and free of soul, but he realizes that selfishness has corrupted his soul, as a swan's white wings might wither in the dark, and the radiant form of a god grow less radiant in the arms of a witch. He feels angry, and all his joy is in remembered youth. His only hope is in Shelley, whom he worships: he prays that the poet's immortal spirit will favour him, shamefully different as his life has been from Shelley's.

*Sun-treader, life and light be thine for ever!  
 Thou art gone from us; years go by, and Spring  
 Gladdens, and the young earth is beautiful,  
 Yet thy songs come not, other bards arise,  
 But none like thee . . .*

The poem continues in a long interlude on Shelley, with a very beautiful extended simile:

thy name

*Which I believed a spell to me alone,  
 Scarce deeming thou wast as a star to men!  
 As one should worship long a sacred spring,  
 Scarce worth a moth's flitting . . .  
 And then should find it but the fountain-head,  
 Long lost, of some great river washing towns  
 And towers . . .*

*Alastor*-and-water, perhaps, but the verse-quality is purer than that of *Queen Mab*.

He has been a sufferer, looking on life as vanity, but Pauline's love has brought him back to truth; he can sing again. He will analyse himself for her:

*I am made up of an intensest life,  
 Of a most clear idea of consciousness,  
 Of self distinct from all its qualities.*

He is his own centre, but is restlessly desirous of experience, though his chief power lies in imagination. He looks towards God, yet neglects His love, he sees God everywhere, but doubts His existence. He has lost the powers of feeling that were his in childhood.

*They came to me in my first dawn of life  
 Which passed alone with wisest ancient books  
 All halo-girt with fancies of my own;  
 And I myself went with the tale . . .*

There followed a period of 'restraint'<sup>1</sup> which changed his soul, and led to falsehood and wrong from which he had to cleanse himself. As peace returned he gave himself to music,

*which is earnest of a heaven,  
 Seeing we know emotions strange by it  
 Not else to be revealed . . .*

<sup>1</sup> There was no external restraint in Browning's life, but the word probably refers to his feeling of the narrowness of his social circumstances.

and to philosophy and poetry, and especially again to Shelley:

my choice fell  
*Not so much on a system as a man—  
 On one, whom praise of mine shall not offend,  
 Who was as calm as beauty, being such  
 Unto mankind as thou to me, Pauline;*

in whose poetry:

*song-inwoven, lurked there words which seemed  
 A key to a new world, the muttering  
 Of angels, something yet unguessed by man . . .  
 My whole soul rose to meet it. Now, Pauline,  
 I shall go mad if I recall that time!*

He found another key to life in Plato, but must go further, seeking 'an end comprising every joy'.

Again he lost hope, and faith, and love, but felt his own powers so strongly that he aspired to be his own God and wear out youth in self-expression. (There follows a passage of some sixty lines of which I can make nothing; the only clear thought is the desire to write a poem which would not 'die utterly'.) It was now that he found Pauline, but not yet love. His soul was chained in its clay prison, but felt 'strange impulse, tendency, desire'. He had Faust-like ambitions, and dreamed of a life devoted to the pursuit of power, pleasure and knowledge, with love, like reason, freed from earthly objects. At present he knew more of hate, but was able to fling it off in the contemplation of beauty—the *Perseus and Andromeda* of Caravaggio on his desk:

- *Andromeda!*  
*And she is with me: years roll, I shall change,  
 But change can touch her not—so beautiful  
 With her fixed eyes, earnest and still, and hair  
 Lifted and spread by the salt-sweeping breeze,  
 And one red beam, all the storm leaves in heaven,  
 Resting upon her eyes and hair, such hair,  
 As she waits the snake on the wet beach  
 By the dark rock and the white wave just breaking*

*At her feet; quite naked and alone; a thing  
I doubt not, nor fear for, secure some god  
To save will come in thunder from the stars.*

So he broods on love, and poetry, and England. .

He dreams of making a home with Pauline in some beautiful natural spot—'out of the world, in thought'. In pursuance of this idea the poem enters deliberately on a long passage of extremely beautiful natural description:

*Night, and one single ridge of narrow path  
Between the sullen river and the woods—*

which presently grows reminiscent of—and can bear comparison with—*The Lotos-eaters*,<sup>2</sup> though having touches which only Browning's brush could have put in:

*And old grey stones lie making eddies there,  
The wild-mice cross them dry-shod. Deeper in!  
Shut thy soft eyes—now look—still deeper in!  
This is the very heart of the woods all round  
Mountain-like heaped above us; yet even here  
One pond of water gleams; far off the river  
Sweeps like a sea, barred out from land; but one—  
One thin clear sheet has overleaped and wound  
Into the silent depths, which gained, it lies  
Still, as but let by sufferance; the trees bend  
O'er it as wild men watch a sleeping girl . . .*

But sadness returns, because he 'cannot be immortal, taste all joy'.

*O God, where do they tend—these struggling aims?  
What would I have? What is this 'sleep' which seems  
To bound all?*

He hungers for God, and in spite of reason yearns to trust in the love of the lonely suffering Christ.

<sup>1</sup> Possibly another Wordsworth reference—*Prelude* (1805) XII, 120–6.

<sup>2</sup> The first edition of the *Poems* bears date 1833, but is said to have come out in December 1832; Pauline was conceived at Richmond in October 1832 (the date given at the end of the poem) and published in January 1833.

Turning at last to Pauline he reminds her that she had bidden him chronicle his early life, which he has now done. He still dreams of living with her, surrounded by her love and the beauty of England, and though it should prove but a dream, and though he may return to his bad ways, he has enshrined the moment in his poem:

*For this song shall remain to tell for ever  
That when I lost all hope of such a change,  
Suddenly beauty rose on me again.*

He ends with a final cry to Shelley—'Sun-treader, I believe in life and truth and love'—and a declaration that his 'last state is happy, free from doubt or touch of fear'.

I have given some space to *Pauline* because I like it. Criticism has generally taken its tone from Browning's own middle-aged disparagement of his first published work, in which he professed to see little beyond crudity and juvenile haste and heat. It was indeed juvenile, written before the author was twenty-one, but it contains more of the elements of greatness than any poem or volume written at an equally early age by an English poet (though the *Nativity Ode* and Tennyson's 1830 volume exhibit a more varied and accomplished art). It is called a 'fragment', but is as complete as the *Unfinished Symphony*. It makes better use of illuminating images than some of the more highly admired later poems. Above all, the fire and passion of rhythmic form drive through it like the moving airs of Spring, harmonizing beauty and feeling, and waking thought to creative life.

One is driven to speculate on the possibility that Mill's criticism (not unaided by the fact that, as Browning told T. J. Wise in 1886, not a single copy of the original edition found a buyer) altered the course of literary history, turning the poet of *Pauline* to those 'dramatic' activities which (except in the actual plays) proved the perfect showground for his genius, barely masking, while at the same time setting free, the poet's own personality, but damping down, to some extent, the pure lyric fire. The 'dramatic lyric' (that contradiction in terms) is almost but not quite Browning's private property. Tennyson has a number of poems of the kind (e.g. *Oenone*, *Ulysses*, *The Gardener's Daughter*, *Locksley Hall*, *Edward Gray*, *Maud*), and Morris a few. Browning insisted that even *Pauline* was 'dramatic in principle', but he certainly found no difficulty in identifying himself with the 'imaginary person'

who was unburdening his soul, and thus permitting the lyrical impulse to take complete hold on his creative self. For *Paracelsus* and *Sordello*, and in most of the poems that followed, he assumed a much more obviously 'dramatic' posture, a much heavier mask, than in *Pauline*, so that the voice, though always Browning's, should seem to be emanating from someone else. (His determined attachment of the label 'dramatic' to nearly all his volumes of short poems is pathetic.) This was, apparently, an advantage, and it certainly gives us a great number of poems not only admirable in the highest degree but of a kind not easily to be found elsewhere. In other words, the change of direction—if it was a change, and I think it was—resulted in the Browning we know and love, and so must be counted a change for the good. Moreover, Browning was too great to be confined even within his own rule, and the lyric impulse often breaks through, unimpeded and pure. But I cannot help wondering whether, if he had snapped his fingers at Mill, Browning might not have been spared the necessity of hiding himself behind high-built façades, historical and otherwise 'dramatic', and we the trouble of digging him out.

For good or ill, his next three works were, in various ways, historical, almost devoid of lyrical inspiration, and with a strong didactic content: these were *Paracelsus*, which I am inclined to class as 'amphibious', *Strafford*, a not very exciting play, and *Sordello*, a narrative poem with a didactic motive. It was eight years before Browning recovered confidence to yield himself to the compulsion of a personal conception of beauty. *Pippa Passes*, though a 'drama', is entirely lyrical in conception and largely so in execution. We are told that Browning was struck by the idea of an obscure person exercising an unconscious but lasting influence on the people she moved among,<sup>1</sup> and the idea seems to have taken shape as almost the only 'original' story he ever wrote: on the whole, like Shakespeare, Browning took his 'plots'—whether of plays or narrative poems—from other writers and made them his own, almost invariably with important personal additions or modifications.

The Introductory scene is—for lyric beauty, the lucid, unlaboured painting-in of a lovely personality, and the skilful setting of the four scenes to come—Browning's most admirable piece of writing up to this point. There are one or two echoes of Pope:

<sup>1</sup> This adequately accounts for *Pippa*, and the resemblance that has been noted between her and the climbing singing boy at the end of *Sordello* is, I should think, accidental.

*Lovers grow cold, men learn to hate their wives,  
And only parents' love can last our lives—*

and one charming and even more surprising fragment of *vers de société*:

*Save that brow its virgin dimness,  
Keep that foot its lady primness,  
Let those ankles never swerve  
From their exquisite reserve;*

but apart from these it is pure Browning, and Browning at his very best, though there is one passage of some thirty lines (beginning, 'And here I let time slip') which betrays that fault of garrulousness of which I shall later have only too much to say.

*Pippa Passes* is called a 'drama', but it demands none of the dramatic construction in which Browning was not over strong—it consists of a 'quartette' of separate scenes with the single link of Pippa's passing.<sup>1</sup> The first scene, *Morning*, of 'Luca's wife, Ottima, and her paramour, the German Sebalb', is very powerful, like a modern horror play, with the body of the just-murdered husband in the background, and the fact gradually coming through the semi-delirious love-making to explain the *Macbeth* atmosphere of nervous tension. Ottima is a deplorable creature, lost in sensual passion, but she is given the finest lines. (A. R. Skemp found her almost a Cleopatra.) One passage of infinitely beautiful nature-observation seems inconsistent with her depravity:

*...that noon I owned my love for you—  
The garden's silence; even the single bee  
Persisting in his toil, suddenly stopped,  
And where he hid you only could surmise  
By some campanula chalice set asway.*

She has too the famous simile of the lightning, more profound in significance than most of Browning's similes—

*Buried in woods we lay, you recollect;  
Swift ran the searching tempest overhead;  
And ever and anon some bright white shaft*

<sup>1</sup> It would make a marvellous film, and God forbid that the fact should ever come to the notice of the film industry.

*Burned through the pine-tree roof, here burned and there,  
As if God's messenger through the close wood screen  
Plunged and replunged his weapon at a venture,  
Feeling for guilty thee and me: then—broke  
The thunder like a whole sea overhead.<sup>1</sup>*

Her voluptuous love grows hotter and hotter, and Sebald (who is a shade less repulsive) is led on to exult in his 'great white queen, magnificent in sin'—and then a breath of sweet fresh air wafts across the fetid scene, and Pippa passes, singing the first of her fateful songs—

*The year's at the spring,  
And day's at the morn . . .*

The effect on the two lovers, especially on Sebald, is incredible, but has to be accepted as a piece of artistic exaggeration. (Gosse perceived 'tragic heights' in the Sebald-Ottima scene, but I doubt whether Aristotle would have agreed with him.)

From the interlude of students we gather that some evil is threatening Pippa. Scene II, *Noon*, is a study in hate, as Scene I was a study in vicious carnal love. It contains a sensitive appreciation of the art and materials of the sculptor, reminding us that Browning had taken some lessons, and afterwards filled in idle days in Italy with carving.

*But of the stuffs one can be master of,  
How I divined their capabilities!  
From the soft-rinded smoothening facile chalk,  
That yields your outline to the air's embrace,  
Half-softened by a halo's pearly gloom;  
Down to the crisp imperious steel, so sure  
To cut its one confided thought clean out  
Of all the world. But marble! 'neath my tools  
More pliable than jelly . . .  
Refine it off to air, you may,—condense it  
Down to the diamond . . .*

As Jules, the young sculptor, is leaving his beloved, Phene, to carry out

<sup>1</sup> I cannot help protesting against the awkwardness and ugliness, even the ambiguity, of her later line—'We lay rising and falling only with our pants'. At the 'reading' mentioned later Miss Margaret Rawlings sensibly, but without authority so far as I know, emended pants to *breath*—greatly to Mr Walter de la Mare's indignation.



his vendetta against his fellow students, Pippa's next song is heard—'Give her but the least excuse to love me'. Its effect on Jules is less explosive but equally complete—he quietly abandons his murderous purpose for the sake of art and love. His last speech is extremely beautiful:

*'To Ancona—Greece—some isle!  
I wanted silence only; there is clay  
Everywhere. One may do whate'er one likes  
In art: the only thing is, to make sure  
That one does like it—which takes pains to know . . .  
Ere night we travel for your land—some isle .  
With the sea's silence on it . . .  
Some unsuspected isle in the far seas!  
Like a god going through his world, there stands  
One mountain for a moment in the dusk,  
Whole brotherhoods of cedars on its brow:  
And you are ever by me while I gaze  
—Are in my arms as now—as now—as now!  
Some unsuspected isle in the far seas!  
Some unsuspected isle in far-off seas!*

The interlude of police makes the loathsome plot against Pippa more evident, and states the dilemma of Luigi, the young patriot of the next scene—*Evening*, a study in political confusion. Luigi is a good man, prepared to die but loving life:

*I rise up happy and content.  
God must be glad one loves his world so much.  
I can give news of earth to all the dead  
Who ask me—last year's sunsets, and great stars . . .  
Those crescent moons with notched and burning rims . . . and that day  
In March, a double rainbow stopped the storm—  
May's warm slow yellow moonlit summer nights—  
Gone are they, but I have them in my soul!*

Pippa's passing solves Luigi's dilemma and incidentally saves him from the police. Her song, 'A king lived long ago', is of a good king, and sends Luigi off to kill the bad one: it is the only one of the four songs where the words seem to be explicitly apt to the occasion.

The interlude of the prostitutes is not very relevant in itself, unless to

throw up Pippa's innocence, but tells us more about Pippa herself and her peril. She is the illegitimate daughter of the Bishop's dead brother, and the Intendant is proposing to get rid of her *via* an overgrown English brute called Bluphocks and the Roman brothels. In the scene that follows—*Night*, a satire on clerical intrigue—there is no sign that the Bishop will agree to this, but in any case Pippa's song as she passes for the last time—'Overhead the tree-tops meet'—causes the Bishop to order the Intendant's arrest.

So Pippa is safe, her day is over, and her work done—souls saved as they should be, not by preaching but by song—and she returns to her poor chamber. The Epilogue is a monologue like the Introduction but inferior to it, lacking the unifying drive of the original inspiration. Nevertheless it begins delightfully:

*The bee with his comb,  
The mouse at her dray,  
The grub in his tomb,  
While winter away;  
But the fire-fly and hedge-shrew  
And lob-worm I pray,  
How fare they?*

—passes a delicious fancy on the way—

*Suppose there's a king of the flowers  
And a girl-show held in his bowers?—*

and comes to the perfect conclusion:

[As she lies down.  
*God bless me! I can pray no more to-night.  
No doubt, some way or other, hymns say right.  
All service ranks the same with God—  
With God, whose puppets, best and worst,  
Are we: there is no last nor first.*

[She sleeps.

It is an interesting indication of Browning's incomplete understanding of the nature of lyric form that, apart from the first (and that is an epigram rather than a song), the songs which Pippa is given at the critical moments are too involved in thought and syntax to have much

lyric quality, while the song which is the most perfect lyric in the whole play is given to one of the bad girls in the interlude:

You'll love me yet!—and I can tarry  
 Your love's protracted growing:  
 June reared that bunch of flowers you carry  
 From seeds of April's sowing.  
 I plant a heartful now; some seed  
 • At least is sure to strike,  
 And yield—what you'll not pluck indeed, .  
 Not love, but, maybe, like.  
 You'll look at least on love's remains,  
 A grave's one violet:  
 Your look?—that pays a thousand pains.  
 ~ What's death? You'll love me yet!

*Pippa Passes* is the best of Browning's plays. It is a real play, and could be acted: I suppose it has been done, though F. G. Kenyon in the introduction to the Centenary Edition 1912 makes no reference to any performance.<sup>1</sup> It is brilliantly original—what we now call 'experimental'. The involving of Pippa's fate with the fourth scene has been objected to, but adds a touch of irony to the execution of the simple primary idea.

Pippa is the first of Browning's women (Pauline was a 'phantom', Michal a shadow, Palma a sketch, and Lady Carlisle a dubiety). She is simple, modest, full of life and curiosity, admiration and love, and she is under the protection of the gods. She grew, through the Lady of Tripoli, Mildred Tresham and the Lost Mistress, the lady who gave the flower its Spanish name, the other who threw the glove and the Duchess who fled, to the women, light, pretty and divine, of *Men and Women* and *Dramatis Personæ*, and ultimately to the full stature of Pompilia, and to her own reincarnation, with glorious Greek enrichments, as Balaustion. Quite early the procession was joined by Elizabeth, who 'coveted most' of all Robert's early work, *Pippa Passes*, and Robert could not deny the rightness of her choice.

## 3

The two long poems, *Pauline* and *Pippa Passes*, are lyric in the sense that they are imaginatively conceived, presented with an integrated beauty born of intense feeling, and written in verse which by the power of rhythmic form keeps the reader at the level of æsthetic sympathy necessary if he is to accompany the poet step by step in his spiritual adventure. Let us next look at some of the lyrics proper, where craftsmanship must be more obviously present for the embodiment of lyric feeling. Here Browning was never at a loss. His skill in the invention of stanza forms has never been surpassed: he hardly ever repeats himself; each new theme calls forth its own appropriate measure; and even the most difficult is handled with brilliant success. His first volume of short poems, the *Dramatic Lyrics*, exhibits this skill at its height, in the *Cavalier Times*. All three are extraordinarily good, each in an entirely different way: each lifts the reader as a genuine 'tune' should; and the best of them, *King Charles*, has such perfect balance of passionate feeling and passionate form that the stubbornest opponent of the 'wrong but romantic' cause becomes an enthusiastic cavalier for the moment. *In a Gondola*, from the same volume,<sup>1</sup> is of a different order—lyric skill of the most varied kind without the lyric impulse. *The Boy and the Angel* (written two years later) is again an example of lyrical (and narrative) genius, this time using the simplest possible means, in metre and diction, to an end absolutely achieved. It is integral in feeling and expression, expression following feeling with perfect ease and sympathy. Feeling and thought are simple but profound, and economy of phrase in the plain octosyllabic couplets contributes to the deeply moving effect.

When we pass on to *Men and Women* we find that another dimension has been added to lyric: the lyric faculty now operates in a world of personality, philosophy, mysticism—in such poems (consideration of the love-poems being deferred) as *A Toccata of Galuppi's*, *Women and Roses*, *Saul*, *A Grammarian's Funeral*, *Childe Roland*. *Women and Roses* would not earn a title to lyric status by its poetic form, which is accomplished but not moving; what gives the poem its undoubted power is the mystic 'dream' that held the poet in its grip as he wrote, and comes to us through his succession of images. It is one of the 'puzzle

<sup>1</sup> My references to volumes are to their contents as originally published, not to the later rearrangement. Thus *In a Gondola* was first published in *Dramatic Lyrics*, but now appears among the *Dramatic Romances*. This is important when we come to *Men and Women*.

poems',<sup>1</sup> and the only help given by the commentators is to tell us that it is the record of a dream occasioned by a gift of roses to Elizabeth. I take it to present an aspect of that 'infinite passion and the pain of finite hearts' of which Browning wrote elsewhere more than once. It is the man's, or the poet's, desire to love the eternal spirit of woman, to identify himself mystically with woman herself, the *uniquiblich* 'to possess and be possessed', to 'quench at a plunge my yearning', to create and shape, but wherever and whenever he makes his passionate attempt it is doomed to failure, his three roses, one and all—women remembered, experienced, imagined—reject him, circling aloof, immersed in their own dream. Man is irrevocably man, and woman woman.

It would appear that *Women and Roses* represents a type of poem opposite to that exemplified in my first chapter, having a verse-form beautiful but unimpassioned and a thought-content which—perhaps because originating in a dream—has the intensity and unanswerableness of mystic truth. The *Toccata* is more completely lyrical. It is the first and loveliest of the poems inspired by music, and though Browning's mystical understanding of music is more explicit in *Abt Vogler*, it is more purely realized in the *Toccata* through the extreme beauty of the lyrical form. The metre is a flexible one, taking either four or eight stresses.

O Galuppi, Baldassaro, this is very sad to find,  
Oh, Hark, the dominant's persistence till it must be answered to

It is the metre used in a less melodious, more reflective, way in *Locksley Hall* (Browning's addition of a third rhyming line turned Tennyson's balanced epigrams into lyrical stanza), and, less obviously, by Poe in *The Raven*. Poe handles the line with a flamboyant subtlety that triumphs (I think) over monotony and absurdity, with the effect of a beauty queen a little fuddled but still adorable. Browning lets the music of his three-lined stanza take possession of him, and as it moves through the poem, rising and falling, swelling and fading, it disturbs the poet and his readers with romantic memories of eighteenth-century events, with tragic thoughts of life and death, with ironic reflections on society.

<sup>1</sup> The writer of two excellent books on Browning (Miss Dallas Fenimore) told me she had sought help as to its meaning from one of our finest living poets—in vain. My interpretation must stand for what it is worth.

. . . mirth and folly were the crop:  
*What of soul was left, I wonder, when the kissing had to stop?*  
*Dust and ashes!* So you creak it . . .

But the music demands a sweeter close, and rises to Browning's human comment:

*Dear dead women, with such hair too—what's become of all the gold  
 Used to hang and touch their bosoms? I feel chilly and grown old.*

A supreme lyric, profoundly conceived and perfectly executed.

*A Likeness*, from *Dramatis Personæ*, is anything but perfect. It is a mixture of sand and sugar, yet since both sand and sugar are good Browning stuff we accept them. In fact we must, or we shall miss some of the least forgettable lines in Browning. The first thirty lines are a lighthearted introduction to the poem proper, which begins with a serious simplicity emphasised by contrast with the preceding playfulness:

*All that I own is a print,  
 An etching, a mezzotint . . .*

And then almost immediately comes the first touch of intensity:

*more than a hint  
 Of a certain face I never  
 Saw elsewhere touch or trace of  
 In women I've seen the face of:*

then, from another quiet beginning:

*I keep my prints an imbroglio,  
 Fifty in one portfolio*

—the poem quickly works up to a really wonderful climax. But on the way it is tossed and torn by the most frightful obstacles in the shape of

idiotic rhymes, necessitating lunatic responses, so that the total effect tends to be ruined (though not for me, with whom the poem is a prime favourite). I suggest a ruthless cutting of all the stuff about tomatoes and waistcoat-strings and keepsakes, leaving the climax of the inexpressible face to be arrived at unimpeded:

*After we've turned over twenty,  
He stops me—'Festina lentè!  
What's that sweet thing there, the etching?'*

*The fool, would he try a flight further and say—  
He never saw, never before to-day,  
What was able to take his breath away:  
A face to lose youth for, to occupy age  
With the dream of, meet death with—why, I'll not engage  
But that, half in a rapture and half in a rage,  
I should toss him the thing's self—'Tis only a duplicate,  
A thing of no value! Take it, I supplicate!'*

Observe how inevitably those three 'say', 'day', 'way' lines prepare for the passionate outburst over the 'face', and how the passion is sharpened by the swiftness afforded by the characteristic use of prepositional endings. Yes, the poem burns with the authentic fire of the passion for beauty, and it is a pity the crackling thorns do so much to efface it. One may compare it with the clowning that jostles the lovelinesses of the *Midsummer Night's Dream*—only Shakespeare succeeds and Browning fails. He had not learnt what Shakespeare knew and what some twentieth-century poets have rediscovered—how to make a harmony of beauty and humour.

Lyrical beauty grows rare in the later volumes, but a poem where feeling and form are indissolubly interwoven is *Fears and Scruples*, from *Pacchiarotto*. The 'still sad music' of the poem is so compelling that it enables the thought (which stands apart from the feeling and form, so that the poem really belongs to my first classification)—enables the thought to work, unnoticed, to a false conclusion which will come up for notice later. Finally, after acres of narrative and didactic, Browning finished up with a lyric in his most personal style. The *Epilogue* lacks the rhythmic urge of Tennyson, but it has a sombre music which effectively conveys the earnest feeling and thought. The heavy deliberate march of

the long lines, varied with quicker-moving shorter ones, and the very exceptional austerity of the rhyme scheme—these elements of prosody are forged into a poetic tool which admirably suited the ageing poet's hand, and enabled him to carve his last utterance clearly on the rock of time: a brilliant statement of one of the poet's ideals, made with such power that a certain uncouth lyric grace possesses the poem.

These are some of the shorter poems of Browning in which I find true lyric quality, and to them might be added a few others without going on to the love-poems (where of course we shall have no difficulty in assembling five times as many). If we put beside them a poem from the supreme lyric poets—*Corinna Going a-Maying*, *Thoughts in a Garden*, *The Tiger*, *Ode to the West Wind*, *To the Cuckoo*, *The Lady of Shalott*, Yeats's *Rose of the World* or de la Mare's *England*—it will be apparent that the power and ascendancy of form is much less strongly marked in Browning. It is not in the least that he 'neglects the form', but that the mystery of form did not mean as much to him as it did to these others. He did not know it as a mystery: its operation was not to him an agony of the soul. When it came it came easily, with entrancing results, but it came spasmodically, and he did not wait for it. The fact that he wrote practically no sonnets suggests that he was not interested in form for its own sake.

## 4

Four of Browning's poems are lyric in form and substance but run to greater length than the normal lyric. These are *Saul*, '*Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came*', *A Grammarian's Funeral*, and *Rabbi Ben Ezra*. Of these, *Saul* and *Rabbi Ben Ezra* are only lyric in part, shading off 'amphibiously' into religion and philosophy. *Saul* was definitely written in two parts: sections I-IX appeared in *Dramatic Romances* 1845, the rest was added to make the complete poem which appeared in *Men and Women* ten years later. It is the first part that is lyrical, part two theological or reflective. As a matter of fact, when Browning took up the poem again the lyrical impulse of what he had already written carried him on for the first of the new sections, so that the real division is I-X and XI-XIX.

Part I is fired by Browning's sympathy with David's great love for Saul, and fed continuously with poetic material—the sunbeam that showed Saul in the darkness of the tent; David's sentiment for his harp



and its varied tunes, from sheep-call to altar music; the nature pieces and scenes from life and death; the climax of glory in the 'wild joy of living' and in the triumphant progress of Saul; the King flinging off his stupor at David's call as a mountain breaks through its snowy breastplate under the shafts of Spring. The poetic feeling flowers in a series of delightful figures, ending in the wonderful extended simile of Saul and the mountain.

*Then Saul, who hung propped  
By the tent's cross-support in the centre, was struck by his name.  
I have ye seen when Spring's arrowy summons goes right to the aim,  
And some mountain, the last to withstand her, that he'd (he alone,  
While the vale laughed in freedom and flowers) on a broad bust of stone  
A year's snow bound about for a breastplate,—leaves grasp of the sheet?  
Fold on fold all at once it crowds tlynderously down to his feet,  
And there fronts you, stark, black, but alive yet, your mountain of old,  
With his rents, the successive bequeathings of ages untold—  
Yea, each harm got in fighting your battles, each furrow and scar  
Of his head thrust 'twixt you and the tempest—all hail, there they are!  
—Now again to be softened with verdure, again hold the nest  
Of the dove, tempt the goat and its young to the green on his crest  
For their food in the ardours of summer. One long shudder thrilled  
All the tent till the very air tingled, then sank and was stilled  
At the King's self left standing before me, released and aware.*

The anapaestic measure, an amplified iambic pentameter, is maintained with great success, but could hardly have gone on longer, because the amplified line is not capable of the variations possible to normal heroic metre. The music that can be extracted from it cannot be other than commonplace (you could not do *Now Sleeps the Crimson Petal* or *Our Revels now are Ended* in anapaests), but its maximum of beauty is achieved in the famous passage:

*Oh the wild joy of living! the leaping from rock up to rock,  
The strong rending of boughs from the fir-tree . . .*

Rabbi Ben Ezra starts off with a first stanza in which a stanza-form of unexampled brilliancy holds its perfect content:

*Grow old along with me!  
The best is yet to be,  
The last of life, for which the first was made:  
Our times are in His hand  
Who saith, 'A whole I planned,  
Youth shows but half; trust God: see all nor be afraid!'*

It is perfection: there is nothing more to be said. But Browning went on to say a great deal more; most of it is controversial and does not concern us here, but the poem led ultimately to the Potter's Wheel and half-a-dozen concluding stanzas of fine lyrical quality. The metaphor itself gives rein to the imagination, and Fitzgerald had already poured his cynical interpretation of its implications into the mould of another exquisite verse-form. Browning's reply is passionate, emotionally, mystically and lyrically:

*Look thou not down but up!  
To uses of a cup,  
The festal board, lamp's flash and trumpet's peal,  
The new wine's foaming flow,  
The Master's lips a-glow!  
Thou, heaven's consummate cup, what need'st thou with earth's wheel?*

If we are looking for imaginative interest, unending vistas of thought, a bottomless well of wonder and suggestiveness, I suppose in all Browning's poetry nothing fulfils our requirements so well as *Childe Roland*, and it gives me extreme satisfaction to accept without qualification Browning's assurance that the poem has no purpose, no moral, no allegorical meaning, but is just the result of a creative response to Edgar's designed irrelevancy. In Browning's lifetime the passion for 'explaining' him and reading hidden meanings into his poems was so widespread that most people were frankly incredulous and insisted on knowing his intention better than he knew it himself. Nettleship was perhaps the most determined sceptic. 'I cannot but think', he wrote, 'that in his mind there was some second meaning, some hidden lesson.' He proceeded to expound the poem as an allegory of a man's life, every item in the journey to the Tower having its figurative equivalent, even the stiff blind horse—'an image of what he may yet come to'.

It is ludicrous, and it is unnecessary. Browning was a narrative poet, not given to allegory: is there a single other poem of his that asks for an allegorical explanation? Of vast loosely-woven fabrics like *The Faerie Queene* and *The Pilgrim's Progress* it can be said that 'the allegory won't bite'; impose an allegorical intention on the finely etched chiaroscuro of *Childe Roland* and it bites the heart out of your enjoyment. And what rich and various enjoyment there is in reading Roland's account of his ride. The story rises with complete naturalness out of the quotation. For a knight to 'come to' a tower he is likely to have been seeking it. So we have Roland as one of a band trained and sworn to find and attack a certain Dark Tower. Others have preceded him and failed. He sets out and presently enquires the way to the Tower of a crippled and sinister-looking person who directs him off the road up a valley. Roland suspects the cripple's good faith, but remembering that the Tower is indeed said to stand somewhere in this valley he turns as directed and rides on. The way is insupportably dreary and depressing, and eventually leads in among mountains. He can see no way through, but realizes that no way through is needed—the Dark Tower is before him. Imagining his predecessors in the adventure watching him from the surrounding hills, he sounds his horn and challenges the Tower. We might like to know what happened next, but that is as far as Edgar's words go, and Browning went no further.

The horrifying details of the journey are fascinating if read as incidents in a ride, and any fear that they may 'mean' something is further dispelled by the knowledge that the landscape of the poem was derived from Browning's early reading of Gerard de Lairese's *Art of Painting*, where a walk is described bearing a minutely close resemblance to this one. Indeed, once you have surrendered yourself to the sheer pleasure of living through with the horseman the amazing experience of that solitary ride, transformed by the poet into a lyrical vision, it is difficult not to be impatient with any demand for interpretation. That scurrying beck:

A sudden little river crossed my path  
As unexpected as a serpent comes.  
No sluggish tide congenial to the glooms;  
This, as it frothed by, might have been a bath  
For the fiend's glowing hoof—to see the wrath  
Of its black eddy bespate with flakes and spumes.

So petty yet so spiteful! All along,  
 Low scrubby alders kneeled down over it;  
 Drenched willows flung them headlong in a fit  
 Of mute despair, a suicidal throng:  
 The river which had done them all the wrong,  
 Whate'er that was, rolled by, deterred no whit:

—you see it, hear it, stumble on its treacherous bed: who wants to have it explained away as a temptation!

If intention other than lyrical there was, it was unconscious. It may be Browning's instinctive reply to the *Grail*. Where Tennyson's ideal was something beautiful and divine to see, to aspire to, to wonder at, to worship, Browning's search is for something to be done, evil to be sought out, attacked and conquered: the way of morality against the way of religion, sacrifice in well-doing rather than saving one's own soul. Yet Browning's 'something' is no commonplace benevolence, but as mysterious as Galahad's vision, The Tower is evil itself: I think we may go so far. Some might read a specific hint into the description of the Tower as 'blind as the fool's heart', which, with the help of Solomon, points to atheism: but the simple idea of evil does least harm to the poem.

The remarkably fine and successful play, *The Dark Tower*, written for the radio by Mr Louis MacNeice, follows the original story very faithfully, with a picturesque underlining of the idea of the band of devotees trained for the quest, this being made a family affair, with a 'possessive mother' as an additional driving force. Mr Walter de la Mare's 'Childe', or wandering horseman, in *The Traveller*, passes over a landscape even more unearthly than Browning's, but his quest, like the verse which depicts it, is more meditative: his end is truth, not action, and he finds it not in a threatening tower but in the inscrutable depths of the regardful and kindly eye of earth. It is tempting to read allegory into this poem also, but as with *Childe Roland* I get a profounder pleasure and a richer illumination out of taking it as a lyrical narrative.

*Childe Roland* is lyric vision; *A Grammarian's Funeral* is lyric thought. The theme is intellectual, the workings of a man's mind; but it has entered Browning's imagination, and initiated a process of intense feeling which makes both thought and verse lyrical. As so often happened with Browning, the metrical form seems to have come to him with the first spontaneous utterance of his thought:

*Let us begin and carry up this corpse,  
Singing together.*

This gave a perfect vehicle for the theme, but unfortunately meant that every other rhyme had to be a double one, with such possibilities as 'based *own*' and 'dead from the waist down'. Such blots, however, occur with grateful infrequency, and on the whole the poem sings its passionately conceived theme, the ideal of the scholar, with beautiful adequateness. Both music and thought rise to four climaxes. The first is marked by the singing lines:

*He was a man born with thy face and throat,  
Lyric Apollo!*

The second declares, with ardent appreciation,

*Yea, this in him was the peculiar grace . . .  
That before living he'd learn how to live—  
No end to learning:  
Earn the means first—God surely will contrive  
Use for our earning.  
Others mistrust and say, 'But time escapes:  
Live now or never!  
He said, 'What's time? Leave Now for dogs and apes!  
Man has Forever.'*

The third is a long passage, full of religious feeling, beginning:

*Was it not great? did he not throw on God  
(He loves the burthen)—  
God's task to make the heavenly period  
Perfect the earthen?*

And the fourth is the conclusion:

*This man decided not to Live but Know . . .  
Here—here's his place, where meteors shoot, clouds form,  
Lightnings are loosened,  
Stars come and go! Let joy break with the storm,*

*Peace let the dew send!  
 Lofty designs must end in like effects:  
 Loftily lying,  
 Leave him—still loftier than the world suspects,  
 Living and dying.*

If we choose to leave the passionate way of the poem and separate out ideas, we may find some of them false—such as that which seems to say that the purely intellectual approach to life is best; and others doubtful—such as the need to complete this life by another. But let the poem's powerful current of feeling carry you and you perceive that all the 'ideas' are taken up into the rhythmic flow, things of beauty beyond mental analysis, and all leading to the irrefutable conclusion—'Lofty designs must end in like effects'.<sup>1</sup>

It seems to me beyond question that in these four poems we have great lyric power exerted on themes of profound significance, and the poems must always stand high in the class of the longer lyric. It is only when we remember that that class contains poems like *Lycidas*, *The Immortality Ode*, *The Grecian Urn*, *Ulysses*, that we remember too that there is a lyric art more finished, perhaps more conscious, of a more tranquil beauty, and capable by the strange perfection of its form of lifting the spirit of imagination into climes more rare than Browning ever knew.

## 5

As Browning began, in *Pauline*, with lyric, and then spent some years in fields where lyric played a minor part, so he began with love, but in a much less positive sense. *Pauline* is ostensibly addressed to a girl in terms of passionate love, but it is sufficiently obvious that the erotic element is almost an abstraction. As with lyric, so with love—he proceeded to give it for many years but a small place among his multifarious poetic interests. In the next thirteen years of his writing-life (to 1846) Browning wrote some half-dozen memorable short love poems: *Cristina*, *Rudel to the Lady of Tripoli*, *The Flower's Name*, *The Lost Mistress*, *Time's Revenges*, *'You'll Love me Yet'*. There are slight love interests in *Faracelus* and *Sordello*. And of course the plots of most of the

<sup>1</sup> Browning wrote a neat letter to the *Daily News* defending with force and humour his 'doctrine of the eulitic De', which had been impugned, indeed declared to be non-existent, in an article in that journal of 20 November 1874.

plays involve a love situation of some kind, handled, like the plays themselves, with varying degrees of competence and nothing more. In contrast to this, *Men and Women* (with *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day*, the ripe poetic fruit of the fifteen years of his marriage) and *Dramatis Personæ* (which followed soon after its end) included between twenty-five and thirty of the loveliest love-poems in the language, some of them being, in their own kind, matchless for depth and beauty of feeling and perfection of lyric form: *By the Fire-side*, *Prospice*, *Love among the Ruins*, *Evelyn Hope*, *Any Wife to Any Husband*, *One Word More*, *James Lee's Wife*, *The Worst of It*, *Too Late*

The meeting and marriage with Elizabeth was Browning's supreme experience (except in so far as the writing of his greatest poem is a poet's supreme experience), but it did not make him a poet, as Wordsworth's supreme experience, the friendship with Coleridge, made Wordsworth a poet, or released his poetry—unstoppered the bottle and let the genie out. There are poems before 1845—*My Last Duchess* and *The Bishop Orders His Tomb* are two—which, being perfect, it was impossible to go beyond. But in the unusually slender proportion of love-poetry in Browning's first period there is nothing of outstanding merit. Browning did not enter the company of the world's great love poets till he was over forty, and married. Elizabeth made Browning a love poet. Her reward was *By the Fire-side*, which I will make bold to call the greatest love poem in the English language.<sup>1</sup>

*By the Fire-side* falls into five parts—five movements, like the 4 minor, called most human of the late Beethoven string quartets. *Section I* consists of the first six stanzas, and long remained for me one of the 'puzzle poems'. Opening with a stanza of flawless beauty:

How well I know what I mean to do  
 When the long dark autumn-evenings come:  
 And where, my soul, is thy pleasant hue?  
 With the music of all thy voices, dumb  
 In life's November too!

it goes on to picture the poet spending 'life's November', a solitary, immersed in the reading of Greek literature. This is consistent with Browning's well-known love of Greek, although in the event Greek

<sup>1</sup> Or am I mistaken? Prof. Sir Henry Jones, in his article on the Brownings in the *Camb. Hist. of Eng. Lit.*, pays a just and penetrating tribute to Browning's 'rendering of the marvel of love', and mentions four of the great love-poems of *Men and Women*, but does not include *By the Fire-side*.

was only one of a dozen interests of his declining years. The difficulty was that this 'Greek' section seemed to have no connection with the rest of the poem. The 'key' is provided at the end of the poem, where, having told his love story, he says:

*And the whole is well worth thinking o'er  
When autumn comes: which I mean to do  
One day, as I said before.*

In other words, the 'great wise book' whose pages he turns and turns is called Greek only because Elizabeth was a Greek scholar and a lover of Euripides. It is the book of his memories—'a vista opening far and wide, and I pass out where it ends'—when memory fades, death will have taken him.

Section II comprises stanzas VII to XX, and describes a scene visited by Robert and Elizabeth from Bagni di Lucca in 1848, and it is given lyrical quality by the strong feeling diffused over the whole picture and the vitality of the detail: he gives us, as he says, 'the *sense* of the yellow mountain flowers'. All the colours of romance (with a touch of Browning's grotesquerie) are in the impression of 'these early November hours':

*That crimson the creeper's leaf across  
Like a splash of blood, intense, abrupt,  
O'er a shield else gold from rim to boss,  
And lay it for show on the fairy-cupped  
Elf-needed mat of moss,*

*By the rose-flesh mushrooms, undivulged  
Last evening—nay, in to-day's first dew  
Yon sudden coral nipple bulged.  
Where a freaked fawn-coloured flaky crew  
Of toadstools peep indulged.*

And the continuous feeling of an occult, comprehensive life rises to its climax in the magical stanza XX:

*And all day long a bird sings there,  
'And a stray sheep drinks at the pond at times;  
The place is silent and aware;  
It has had its scenes, its joys and crimes,  
But that is its own affair.*



It is the *third section*, stanzas XXI to XXX, that constitutes, in itself and by itself, that supreme and unrivalled poem of married love of which I spoke. (Did I say just 'love' before—not 'married love'?) It is faultlessly beautiful in its intense lyrical visualizing of the past:

*At first 'twas something our two souls  
Should mix as mists do . . .*

*But who could have expected this  
When we two drew together first  
Just for the obvious human bliss,  
To satisfy life's daily thirst  
With a thing men seldom miss?*

--of the present, with Elizabeth herself pictured in words of unparalleled beauty and tenderness; and of the future: ~

*an age so blest that, by its side,  
Youth seems the waste instead . . .*

*Think, when our one soul understands  
The great Word which makes all things new . . .*

and its lovely invitation to

*Come back with me to the first of all,  
Let us lean and love it over again,  
Let us now forget and now recall,  
Break the rosary in a pearly rain,  
And gather what we let fall!*

Up to this point the poem has been entirely personal, with a basis of realistic fact. In *Section IV* (Stanzas XXXI to XLVIII) there is a change to the imaginative and dramatic. Browning delighted in 'going back to the first of all', but was not prepared to do so literally. The Wimpole Street story was one for impassioned prose, and had received that treatment in the *Letters*. So he imagined a parallel but less extraordinary situation—two lovers, as yet unplighted, walking in the scene described in *Section II*. There is hardly a hint of allegory or parallelism in detail: there are many ways in which a great love can be begun—that of Robert and Elizabeth was one, this is another.

The poem returns to the place that is 'silent and aware'—to the point in late afternoon when

*the silence grows  
To that degree, you half believe  
It must get rid of what it knows,  
Its bosom does so hear.*

It recalls in minute detail a passage in the walk—over the bridge to the ruined chapel, where they looked through the grate. This is the kind of memory Miss Bowen had in mind when she used her cup-and-saucer analogy. There could be no such supporting memories in the love of Robert and Elizabeth, so this one is invented for the lovers who stand for them. Then comes the 'moment, one and infinite', a phrase which Mr W. O. Raymond takes to typify the essential quality of Browning's poetry. I think *By the Fire-side* is the only poem where he shows that he would have understood Professor Leone Vivante's words: 'Silence (another name for indeterminacy, or the potential moment) is a reality.' How marvellously the moment is brought to us:

*Oh moment, one and infinite!  
The water slips o'er stock and stone;  
The West is tender, hardly bright:  
How grey at once is the evening grown—  
One star, its chrysolite!*

And with what power and veracity Browning states the tremendous content of such a moment:

*Oh, the little more, and how much it is!  
And the little less, and what worlds away!  
How a sound shall quicken content to bliss,  
Or a breath suspend the blood's best play,  
And life be a proof of this!*

As the moment endures, the future hangs in the balance, and we get a glimpse of Browning the self-abnegating lover, ready to bow to a woman's word:

*Had she willed it, still had stood the screen  
So slight, so sure, 'twixt my love and her:*

and perhaps another of that 'light rational bachelordom' which for anyone else than Elizabeth would have remained undisturbed:

*For my heart had a touch of the woodland-time,  
Wanting to sleep now over its best . . .*

And in the line, 'a last leaf, fear to touch', one sees the situation which Elizabeth was inclined to want perpetuated—the passionate friendship without the final risk of marriage. But the last leaf fell, and a fine metaphor tells what has happened:

*A moment after, and hands unseen  
Were hanging the night around us fast;  
But we knew that a bar was broken between  
Life and life: we were mixed at last  
In spite of the mortal screen:*

with a vivid personification, embodying the mystic sense which has been present throughout, to complete the episode:

*The forests hgd done it; there they stood;  
We caught for a moment the powers at play.  
They had mingled us so, for once and good,  
Their work was done—we might go or stay,  
They relapsed to their ancient mood.*

The short concluding section (from which I like to omit the ultra-ethical stanza 1) reflects on the story. 'The world is made for each of us', and leads every man to his climacteric moment when his soul is to declare itself:

*I am named and known by that moment's feat;  
There took my station and degree;  
So grew my own small life complete,  
As nature obtained her best of me—  
One born to love you, sweet!*

For passion—high, serious, noble, tender; for profound understanding of life, of love and of the human soul, and for the greatness of mind that lies behind this; for lyrical beauty of feeling and form: for all these in combination I can find no equal in any single poem (unless perhaps in *John Anderson, my Jo*—but I suppose that would be absurd). To find anything that will sway level in the balance you must take a whole group of poems, and of such only three have a chance: the *Sonnets* of Shakespeare (which fall as far below in quality of love as they stand above in lyric beauty); the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*; and Hardy's group called *Poems of 1912-13*. The name of Coventry Patmore suggests itself, but I cannot find him a serious rival to Browning. *The Angel in the House*, with its second part, *The Victories of Love*, presents a beautiful but conventionalized love, following and dependent on the conventional good behaviour of the lady, and based on the condescending admiration of a lord of creation for a beloved and adoring hand-maid. It belongs to a period, and has no truth outside its half-century, whereas *By the Fire-side* is completely in place if imagined in the age of Dante, of Shakespeare, or in any succeeding time. Five or six of the poems of *The Unknown Eros* voice agonized grief for a dead wife, but they sound this single note with far less poignant sincerity than Hardy in the *Poems of 1912-13*.

Only one other love-poem had Elizabeth for its ostensible subject (during her lifetime)—*One Word More* (whose first line, 'There they are, my fifty men and women', ought by itself to have deterred Browning from the reprehensible scattering of the contents of the original two glorious volumes). The unusual metre, trochaic pentameter, set (as often) by the nature of the opening sentence, is appropriate to the tender intimate approach of the poem, but needed an expert in metre to handle for as long as this. The octosyllabic form is much easier, and served well for the endless crude narrative of *Hiawatha*: it runs continuously on, while in pentameters lyric movement is impeded by the necessity of pausing at the end of each line, which is conducive rather to epigram:

*Where the heart lies, let the brain lie also;*

*Other heights in other lives, God willing;*

*He who blows through bronze, may breathe through silver.*

Unlike *By the Fire-side*, the poem has no continuous lyric power; it rises only twice to great beauty of form—in the moving *Section XII*:

*I shall never, in the years remaining,  
Paint you pictures, no, nor carve you statues,  
Make you music that should all-express me;  
So it seems: I stand on my attainment.  
This of verse alone, one life allows me;  
Verse and nothing else have I to give you.  
Other heights in other lives, God willing:  
All the gifts from all the heights, your own, Love!*

and, with feeling a little less deep, music a little thinner, in *Section XVIII*:

*This I say of me, but think of you, Love!  
This to you—yourself my moon of poets!  
Ah, but that's the world's side, there's the wonder,  
Thus they see you, praise you, think they know you!  
There, in turn I stand with them and praise you—  
Out of my own self, I dare to phrase it!  
But the best is when I glide from out them,  
Cross a step or two of dubious twilight,  
Come out on the other side, the novel  
Silent silver lights and darks undreamed of,  
Where I hush and bless myself with silence.*

The poem falls into two halves, with two themes: the placing of art at the service of the beloved—a special not-native art, here a personal utterance instead of a dramatic, 'Let me speak this once in my true person'; and the moon-metaphor, used with a brilliant illuminating power equal to that of the moon herself. The sections (*XV* to *XVIII*) that work out this moon-figure are supremely beautiful, but (apart from the quoted stanza *xii*) I think the earlier part which embodies the 'special art' theme is on a lower level. The idea is a charming one, but its working out is 'amphibious', and *Section IX*, with Browning's caustic allusions to his critics and his public, breaks the current almost as sharply as Milton's similar attack on the apathetic clergy does that of *Lycidas*. One would say that the lovely intention of the poem is not

quite fulfilled, except that the utter perfection of the second part wipes out all impression of earlier imperfection and leaves the reader satisfied and happy.

Late in life Browning said he had never dreamed of putting the great sorrows of his life into his poetry. Losing Elizabeth so soon, he had time and occasion to make his contribution to that poetry of loss in which the names of Patmore, Hardy and de la Mare stand out most significantly. Browning's faith in the after-life was so strong and circumstantial that the poems in which he refers to Elizabeth after she was dead are entirely free from anguish. Their serenity rests on two clear assumptions: that she is still herself and watches him from her new life—this in *Amphibian* and the 'lyric love' passage in *The Ring and the Book*; and that death will re-unite her to him—in *Prospice* and *Householder*. *Prospice*, where passion rises and falls in great waves, is in the main an assertion of Browning's confident courage in the face of life and death, and seems to come almost 'unaware' to the ecstatic thought of reunion. The 'posy' with which Book I of *The Ring and the Book* concludes is very beautiful but leaves me a little uncomfortable. Is it perhaps a trifle glib? The first two lines:

O lyric Love, half angel and half bird  
And all a wonder and a wild desire,—

are divinely good and true; but the passage seems to degenerate into a run of Browning's special particular convoluted alliterative sentences, too smooth for feeling—although doubtless the feeling lives under the mastery, as it does under the effortless art of a great actor.

*Amphibian* and *Householder* I shall speak of with *Fifine at the Fair*, but there is another poem, which appeared almost at the same time as *Prospice* (in 1864), and which voices a passion so deep that one feels it cannot be altogether objective. Browning's interpretation of the look in the eyes of Eurydice in Leighton's well-known picture is original and creative, but surely owes something to his own intense desire for one last look from the lost Elizabeth:

• But give them me, the mouth, the eyes, the brow!  
Let them once more absorb me! One look now  
Will lap me round for ever, not to pass  
Out of its light, though darkness lie beyond:

*Hold me but safe again within the bond  
Of one immortal look! All woe that was,  
Forgotten, and all terror that may be,  
Defied,—no past is mine, no future: look at me!*

## 6

The love poems considered in the foregoing section have been personal in feeling and pure lyric in form. There remain a larger number of 'dramatic' love poems, many of which have the true lyric quality. The love-lyrics of the pre-1846 volumes are mostly concerned with a romantic 'queen-worship'. *Cristina* records an artificial spasm in this direction; *Rudel to the Lady of Tripoli* is a simpler and lovelier expression of the worshipping attitude; and this finds its most delightful voice in *The Flower's Name*, where we have at last a real woman as the object of adoration. The poem is flawless, but only rises to lyric beauty at two places:

*Till she gave me, with pride to make no slip,  
Its soft meandering Spanish name:  
What a name! Was it love or praise?  
Speech half-asleep or song half-awake?  
I must learn Spanish, one of these days,  
Only for that slow sweet name's sake . . .*

*Where I find her not, beauties vanish;  
Whither I follow her, beauties flee;  
Is there no method to tell her in Spanish  
June's twice June since she breathed it with me?*

The rest is colloquial—an earlier instance of Browning's mastery of this unusual medium of lyric: the commonplace raised to exquisiteness by grace and sensitive feeling. *The Lost Mistress*, the last of these early poems, is quite different in tone, which is tender but untrue, a love easily surrendered with playful regret, a good-night preceding a new Spring, the kind of love that makes up the lesser half of life. The form is charming, but epigrammatic rather than rhythmic, though the treatment is lyrical.

For a poet who was to become one of the greatest of love poets, this handful represents a slender achievement in this kind up to the age of forty. Moreover, not one of these poems ventures beyond the shimmering circle of romantic love. As soon as we enter the new territory of *Men and Women* we recognize an atmosphere charged with a loftier passion, the atmosphere of true love. *Love among the Ruins*, a great and lovely poem, made a wonderful opening for the first volume of *Men and Women*. The theme is the permanence of true love against the transitory life of empires—the theme of ‘Only a man harrowing clods’, where Hardy states with the terse emphasis of an oracle what Browning handles with profuse emotional beauty. The alternating pictures of peace and war are delightfully presented, and the verse-form is capable of both meditation and description. Unlike the early poems, those in *Men and Women* are all as different as primary colours, and *Two in the Campagna* takes us back to romantic love. The ostensible theme is

*How is it under our control  
To love or not to love?*

But what is really causing the bewilderment of the ‘two’ is a thing incident to romantic love—its imperfection and consequent changeableness. A suggestion is offered in explanation:

*Infinite passion, and the pain  
Of finite hearts that yearn.*

A flattering fallacy, yet a thought so powerful that it lends a strange dignity to the perplexities and wandering desires, anything but ‘infinite’, that have preceded. The landscape setting is again made significant, and is painted in with greater subtlety than that of *Love among the Ruins*, which has nothing quite so impressionistic as this:

*The champaign with its endless fleece  
Of feathery grasses everywhere!  
Silence and passion, joy and peace,  
An everlasting wash of air—  
Rome’s ghost since her decease.*

*Evelyn Hope* is one of those poems felt to be ‘born with the integrity



of a single word'. The theme is a peculiarly fantastic type of romantic love, but the poem's utter loveliness and perfection of form convince us that the situation has more truth and significance than it really has. It is the sentiment of an exquisite mind raised by lyric beauty to a semblance of passion, and made impressive by the inclusion of one of Browning's favourite notions—'more lives yet' and 'worlds I shall traverse not a few', as well as by the final touch of the leaf shut in the 'sweet cold hand'. *A Woman's Last Word* may be read thus romantically, rather than realistically, if we are to judge by Mrs Orr's remark that the poem shows 'one of Browning's very few conventional women'—that is, women as men see them. (Perhaps Mrs Orr's ideal woman was Mrs Caudle of the *Curtain Lectures*.) However the poem is read, it takes a lasting charm from the dainty stanza with its double rhyme impeccably handled:

*What so false as truth is,  
False to thee?  
Where the serpent's tooth is  
Shun the tree—*

*Where the apple reddens  
Never pry,  
Lest we lose our Edens,  
Eve and I.*

Did Mrs Orr suspect no irony here? Does not the poem show the wiser woman yielding to the stronger man in the realization that, where love is, the overriding need is not 'truth' but peace, the woman's last word?

All these poems burn with lyric fire, and the same is true of two rather longer poems in *Men and Women*—*Mesmerism* and *Any Wife*. *Mesmerism* is an astonishing example of Browning's mental and linguistic power, in that the greater part of the poem (stanzas II to XX) comprises one long sentence, running on, with mounting speed, breathlessly yet with complete accuracy, syntax and sense unbroken. This tight hold on a complicated thought and swift unity of utterance arise out of (and at the same time help to produce) the intensity of feeling which raises the poem into the lyric class. The feeling is mystic, of a narrow personal order, and the speaker is not Browning but a mesmerist. Browning may easily have felt that such power was only an extension of the telepathic communion which he had noted in *By the Fire-side* as existing between Elizabeth and himself.

But the most important love-poem in *Men and Women*, with the single exception of *By the Fire-side*, is *Any Wife to Any Husband*. I have already spoken of the possibility that the poem may have a slight personal reference to the relations between Browning and his wife, and I shall here consider it only as a 'dramatic' study of a marital situation. It is in any case a companion piece to *By the Fire-side*, and was printed immediately after it both in the original publication and in the later rearrangement, as also in Browning's own arrangement of *Selections*. The two poems are parallel, the first showing how the man foresees himself in later years, the second his wife's less idyllic forecast. The beautiful picture built up in *By the Fire-side* is exactly repeated, from the other side, in stanzas XVIII and XIX of *Any Wife*, where the wife says:

*Might I die last and show thee! Should I find  
Such hardship in the few years left behind . . . ?  
Why, time was what I wanted, to turn o'er  
'Within my mind each look, get more and more  
By heart each word, too much to learn at first;  
And join thee all the fitter for the pause  
'Neath the low doorway's lintel. That were cause  
For lingering, though thou calledst, if I durst!*

The forcible use of the idea of the 'mixing' of souls noted in *By the Fire-side*—'Twas something our two souls should mix as mists do', and 'We were mixed at last in spite of the mortal screen'—is repeated in *Any Wife*—'Because our inmost beings met and mixed'. The two poems seem to be two studies of a perfect love, idealized in the one, in the other presented with its human (and masculine) frailties upon it. With our knowledge of Browning's numerous and close women-friendships, especially the one that might have brought disaster, we may wonder at the self-knowledge shown in this prophetic picture of 'any husband'. 'Any wife' is probably not intended to present Elizabeth at all—certainly not in the over-bitter irony of such words as:

*Love so, then, if thou wilt! Give all thou canst  
Away to the new faces—disentranced,  
(Say it and think it) obdurate no more:  
Re-issuè looks and words from the old mint,  
Pass them afresh, no matter whose the print  
Image and superscription once they bore!*

—even though this is presently followed by the divine pity of

*Only, why should it be with stain at all?  
Why must I, 'twixt the leaves of coronal,  
Præ any kiss of pardon on thy brow?*

The poem is notable as a demonstration of the clarity with which Browning could write when the mood was on him. Apart from stanza v, which beats me, the whole complex process of thought and emotion is conveyed with beautiful precision and intelligibility. It is an even more perfect work of art than *By the Fire-side*, which was, as we saw, in five parts, while here we have a single thought without division or seam. The only change comes when, as with the classical elegy, despair turns suddenly to triumph. As the 'wife' draws to her end she raises her voice and her head,

*And yet thou art the nobler of us two:  
What dare I dream of, that thou canst not do,  
Outstripping my ten small steps with one stride?  
I'll say then, here's a trial and a task—  
Is it to bear?—if easy, I'll not ask:  
Though love fail, I can trust on in thy pride.  
Pride?—when those eyes forestall the life behind  
'The death I have to go through!—when I find.  
Now that I want thy help most, all of thee!  
What did I fear? Thy love shall hold me fast  
Until the little minute's sleep is past  
And I wake saved . . .*

And then, with indescribable effect, she adds,

*And yet—it will not be!*

In contrast to the exalted mood of *Prospice*, the other love-poems of *Dramatis Personæ* (1864) are all tragic, though all have intense lyric quality. *James Lee's Wife* is a cycle of nine poems, and invites comparison with other sequences, such as Tennyson's *Maud*, Arnold's *Switzerland* and *Faded Leaves*, and Meredith's *Modern Love*. *Modern Love* I will

leave for the time being. *Maud* tells a melodramatic story: a man and a girl fall in love, but he is insulted by her brother, kills him in a duel, and has to go abroad, where he temporarily loses his reason. The poems in which the story is told vary from turgid political oratory to purest lyric. Arnold's two sets tell no story but rise out of a sad situation: a man loves a woman but cannot unite with her because (a) she has once loved another, (b) her love for him is inconstant, (c) mortals are born to 'live alone'. Tennyson's and Arnold's poems (like Meredith's) are conceived entirely from the man's point of view. *James Lee's Wife* again presents a situation, a more commonplace one than Arnold's: husband and wife are about to part because the man's love has died: the situation is shown from the woman's angle, and each of the nine poems presents a new approach to the problem by the woman. Herford says, 'Her problem was like Browning's own, how to survive when answering love was gone'. Much as I respect Herford's judgment, I feel that the 'going' of the answering love was so different in the two cases that there could be no comparison between the respective problems of 'survival': Browning was left with hope and lovely memories, James Lee's wife with nothing but bitterness and despair. The man does not appear (though the poem was at first called *James Lee*) but somehow gives the impression of being an oaf (though one must remember Mrs Orr's amusing observation, 'We learn from the ninth poem that James Lee's wife was a plain woman. This may throw some light on the situation.') In *Maud* both man and girl are in full view; in the Arnold poems the man paints himself as a neurotic pessimistic philosopher, while Marguerite is suggested with a subtle and elusive fascination.

It appears that Mrs James Lee is not only 'plain' but an intellectual (vi) and an art student (viii), while poem iv shows that the shipwreck of love (admirably indicated by analogy in ii) has come about through her love being too blindly passionate, giving too much and asking too little, while making the 'boud' too obvious for a 'light, light love' like this. This dangerously unrestrained love on the part of a woman was a trouble that struck Browning as very real: he had referred to it in the *Letters*, and presented the same situation in *In a Year*. In the ninth poem she sets the man free, but would like him to admit the obvious fact that things would have gone better if he had loved as passionately as she: yet had he done so, she would have died of joy, she says—so abject is her 'passion'.

She has been responsible for two of the greatest of Browning's

shorter lyrics: the first poem in the series has one of the most exquisite stanza-forms ever devised:

*Ah, love, but a day  
And the world has changed!  
The sun's away,  
And the bird estranged;  
The wind has dropped  
And the sky's deranged:  
Summer has stopped.*

It permits swift movement with dramatic pause, a rhythmic rise and fall that produces the lyric transport, and has a rhyme which inspires as by no means always with Browning:

*Thou art a man  
But I am thy love.  
For the lake, its swan;  
For the dell, its dove;  
And for thee —(oh, haste!)  
Me, to bend above,  
Me, to hold embraced.*

Poem VI is deeply interesting, with its ample thought-content completely taken up into the æsthetic feeling. This too has a most effective stanza, three pentameters followed by tetrameter and trimeter:

*Then, when the wind begins among the vines,  
So low, so low, what shall it say but this?  
'Here is the change beginning, here the lines  
Circumscribe beauty, set to bliss  
'The limit time assigns.'*

The poem shows the wife as a thinker, but is otherwise irrelevant, for though its theme, mutability, is the world-fact which has sentenced her, she does not go on to recognize her life as coming under the law. She has begun the poem by quoting from a book she is reading—quoting a poem actually written by Browning some forty years earlier. It is a very good poem, an impression in sound of an 'ailing wind' done with all the brilliant clarity of that first period. The later Browning now, in the person of Mrs Lee, broods out the melancholy strain of thought set

up by the 'dumb, wronged' wind—how 'nothing can be as it has been before', and how, although a young man may courageously accept the law of life,

*Simple? Why this is the old woe o' the world;  
Time, to whose rise and fall we live and die.  
Rise with it, then! Rejoice that man is hurled  
From change to change unceasingly,  
His soul's wings never furl'd!*

—yet the woman (and the older man) cannot fully acquiesce without acknowledging Browning's oft-expressed belief in life as a probationary period:

*That's a new question, still replies the fact,  
Nothing endures: the wind moans, saying so;  
We moan in acquiescence: there's life's pact,  
Perhaps probation—do I know?  
God does: endure his act!*

*James Lee's Wife* has far more facets of intellectual interest than either *Maud* or the two Arnold groups. It never sinks to the bogs of banality which disfigure *Maud* ('I keep but a man and a maid, ever ready to slander and steal'), but only once, in the first poem, approaches the supreme lyric, 'Come into the garden, Maud', and only once, in 'Still ailing, wind', the poignant beauty of Arnold's immortal poem, 'Yes, in the sea of life enisled'.

A woman's love, painfully depicted in *James Lee's Wife*, is balanced by two less realistic studies of a man's love, in *The Worst of It* and *Too Late*. The first of these bears comparison with *By the Fire-side* for depth and purity of feeling, but presents a less normal situation shown only from one angle, that of forgiveness for infidelity. The forgiveness is unqualified:

*Would it were I had been false, not you!  
I that am nothing, not you that are all:  
I, never the worse for a touch or two  
On my speckled hide; not you, the pride  
Of the day, my swan, that a first fleck's fall  
On her wonder of white must unswan, undo!*

But there is no condoning of the sin, as in the outlook of to-day: it is called comparatively 'trivial', but not ignored—the devil will have his stab for it:

*He stabs for the minute of trivial wrong,  
Nor the other hours are able to save—  
The happy, that lasted my whole life long . . .  
My heart a-slow with the good I know  
Of a perfect year when we both were young,  
And I tasted the angels' fellowship.*

Her falseness has not killed his love, but it has awakened a strain of cynicism in him.

*Men tell me of truth now—'False!' I cry,  
Of beauty—'A mask, friend! Look beneath!'  
We take our own method, the devil and I . . .*

But in the main his attitude is one of pure loving goodness:

*Dear, I look from my hiding-place.  
Are you still so fair? Have you still the eyes?  
Be happy! Add but the other grace,  
Be good! . . .*

The poem keeps up a simple conversational lyric music in an attractive easy stanza with a pleasant internal rhyme in the fourth line, and a frequent rise into sheer loveliness of word and feeling. It is the Browning of the *Love Letters*, and for spirit there is nothing like it outside Browning.

*Too Late*, with its much more complicated but powerfully handled stanza, is equally moving but less satisfying, because one feels that for all its beauty this is nothing but romantic love and queen-worship invested with an unusual degree of permanence. *The Worst of It* had suggested true love broken by a 'trivial' though fatal infidelity on the woman's part: this man has been 'scorned', regarded as a 'blank lay-figure', 'set aside' in favour of 'the other' whom she married. He has gone on rather idiotically loving and hoping that the husband will die

and 'Edith' will then turn to him, instead of which Edith has died and it is now 'too late'. The poem opens with expressions of beautiful feeling:

*Here was I with my arm and heart  
And brain, all yours for a word, a want  
Put into a look . . .  
Did I speak once angrily, all the drear days  
You lived, you woman I loved so well,  
Who married the other? . . .*

He visualizes his difficulties and his hopes in a wonderful metaphor, and thinks whether it would not have been

*. . . better even [to] have burst like a thief  
And borne you away to a rock for us two,  
In a moment's horror, bright, bloody and brief.*

This was the Duke's problem in *The Statue and the Bust*. The Duke, we remember, failed to solve it through inertia and lack of spirit; this man decides, and makes inaction positive—he is a civilized person, and will not resort to violence:

*Then changed to myself again—'I slew  
Myself in that moment; a ruffian lies  
Somewhere'.*

Besides, the lady was not willing in this case, and I do not think the man of *Too Late*, though 'frustrate', would fall under Browning's condemnation of 'the unlit lamp and the ungirt loin'.

There is more colloquialism, charmingly managed, here than in *The Worst of It*, and fewer passages of lyric beauty. The description of Edith—'I liked that way you had with your curls'—is delightful, and the poem ends on a note of high romance, with a glorious hyperbole:

*But I turn my back on the world: I take  
Your hand, and kneel, and lay to my lips . . .  
There you stand,  
Warm too, and white too: would this wine  
Had washed all over that body of yours,  
Ere I drank it, and you down with it, thus!*



There is little real lyric among the later poems, but the charming poem about the old wall which forms a prologue to *Pacchiarotto* is a beautiful and genuine love-poem. To the lover's imagination the wall and its creepers pulsate with life as the beloved moves singing behind it. Separated in actuality, spirit bends to spirit: the lover has faith that the barrier will dissolve—he 'holds on, hopes hard in the subtle thing that's spirit'. The poem surely offers one of the signs which Browning puts in from time to time that his own yearning for reunion is unassuageable.

There remain a number of love-poems which are devoid of lyrical quality but engaging for their Browning tang and interesting as throwing further light on his treatment of love. *In a Year* has been mentioned as providing a second instance of a woman 'stooping to folly' (in the Victorian way, hardly less fatal than the sense which Goldsmith intended). It is a study of failure in love. Here, besides the over-abundant response by the woman in gratitude for the man's love—

*Would he loved me yet,  
On and on,  
While I found some way undreamed—  
—Paid my debt!*

—the causes of failure are made clearer than in *James Lee's Wife*. The beginnings were obviously inadequate, and the subsequent love a poor kind of thing to be even grateful for:

*'What, she felt the while,  
Must I think?  
Love's so different with us men!  
He should smile:  
'Dying for my sake—  
White and pink!  
Can't we touch these bubbles then  
But they break?'*

Note the clever stanza with its intricate rhyme formula, which at least once betrays to a pointless line—the final one: what does it mean?

The companion poems *One Way* and *Another Way of Love* give two angles on romantic love. The first, very delightfully, gives its philosophy; the second (an obvious 'puzzle poem') shows a woman turning

upon a mere romantic lover—the man who tires of a constant love—and threatens either to exert her arts and take another lover or withdraw into hard bitter frigidity.

These are in *Men and Women*, but already, in that utterly pagan satire, *Time's Revenges*, Browning had caricatured romantic love, exhibited it *ad nauseum* and reduced it *ad absurdum*. It might have made a third 'madhouse cell', with its queen-worship misapplied and gone rotten: infatuation with a pretty but evil woman crowding out decent friendship and the return of a friend's great love. The concluding paradoxical couplet,

*There may be heaven; there must be hell;  
Meantime, there is our earth here—well!*

means, 'Since there is such evil in human nature as is displayed in the situation just narrated, there must be a hell to deal with it, though it is to be hoped there is a heaven for my friend; but before that there is life to be lived, and—well, as I say, there must be hell because I am in it'. Apart from the horrible perversions of feeling which the man of the poem boasts of, *Time's Revenges* is a brilliant piece of verse-making.

Besides the *Prologue* and *St Martin's Summer*, which have received attention, the *Pacchiarotto* volume includes two love poems of admitted difficulty. *Bifurcation* begins—

*We were two lovers, let me lie by her,  
My tomb beside her tomb.*

There follow two long inscriptions for the two head-stones, from which it may be deduced that the woman gave up love for a loveless duty, while the man continued to love, but, since his true love had lost its object, he strayed into sinful love, sometimes pleasurable sometimes painful. Both believed the after-life would bring relief in the form of an existence in which love and duty could be combined, instead of, as here, one excluding the other. She chose duty by preference, he was forced into a life of 'undutiful' love. The poem ends:

*Inscribe each tomb thus: then, some sage acquaint  
The simple—which holds sinner, which holds saint!*

Venturing to adopt the role of sage, I would say that he was the obvious sinner but that she sinned more deeply in abandoning him in the name of some dull duty to his life of temptation. Mrs Orr's conclusion is, 'We feel that Mr Browning condemns the apparent saint'.

*Nympholeptos* (explained as caught by a nymph—rather by love for a nymph) is an unreasonably 'tough' poem. Berdoe calls it 'perhaps the most difficult of Browning's poems', and the other commentators are not really convincing in their efforts to expound. Browning himself, in response to a cry for help from the Browning Society *via* its President, called it 'an allegory of an impossible ideal object of love'. He went on, 'i had no particular woman in my mind; certainly never intended to personify wisdom, philosophy or any other abstraction'. The situation is that of a man pleading with a woman, described as being frigid like a nymph, to do more than pity and pardon him—to love him. She keeps sending him out on his travels, and each time he returns he expects to find love but gets nothing but pitying wonder at his travel-stained appearance. He rages at her presumption, and declares he will travel no more—but sets out once more in hope of his reward. The various routes by which he travels are represented as coloured rays sent out from her central whiteness.

It is impossible to read the poem autobiographically—as Browning pleading with Elizabeth—because he was sure of Elizabeth's love (*Householder* was written about the same time), and Elizabeth was no cold nymph. The use of the plural, 'ay, you were easy victors', suggests the possibility that the picture is that of man *vis-à-vis* woman. Browning contrasts the rapier-edge of man's truth with the bulrush-spear of womanly falsehood, but hints a realization that this falsehood, this 'right divine to waive all process', may be feminine intuition. If this explanation serves, the coloured rays emanating from her white light (and I must say I find the business of his travelling along these rays rather absurd) are her intuitive speculations: he tries to follow them out, but fails, and is the object of her continued scorn and pitying smile. He understands

*That who would worthily retain the love  
Must share the knowledge shrined those eyes above.*

Otherwise, substituting moral for intellectual heights, it may be an allegory of woman's (Victorian) virtue demanding an equivalent in

man, expecting him to have had experience (travelling down the rays) and yet to have remained stainless.<sup>1</sup>

The poem shows Browning still a master of the rhymed couplet, and still interested in a slightly abnormal species of love-relation.

In the last volume of all, *Asolando*, Browning returns, after long exile, to the lyric form, though not to its spirit (no one but Walter de la Mare has written essential lyric after the age of seventy). *Asolando* contains four or five love-songs without soul or substance—*Now*, *Humility*, *Poetics*, *Summum Bonum*, *A Pearl*, *a Girl*—exercises in an old mode; and two exquisite memories of Elizabeth. In *Dubiety*, he is happy, completely at peace, and wonders when he last experienced such a condition: in a dream, or a vision?—or was it perhaps when Elizabeth leaned over to kiss him on the brow? Then there is the very small poem, *Speculative*, where one feels the poet thinking, brooding, speaking out of the depths. He is alone with his soul, and two of his life-long beliefs emerge in these ten brief lines—that the after-life is a continuation of this life, and that death will mean reunion with Elizabeth. The intense feeling gives a lyric beauty to the second of the two stanzas:

*I shall pray: 'Fugitive as precious—  
Minutes which passed,—return, remain!  
Let earth's old life once more enmesh us,  
You with old pleasure, me—old pain,  
So we but meet nor part again!'*

To go back a few years to a poem omitted as being freakish and out of the main stream: possibly the last poem with true lyric force Browning wrote—or published—is the one beginning, 'Not with my Soul', attached to *Plot-Culture* in *Ferishtah's Fancies* (1884). The idea of the poem seems to be that 'soul' cannot enter into any love after the first great love; it is the soul that is laden with memories, and only the onrush of the senses can wipe them out and 'quench Soul'. The poem has been associated with Lady Ashburton, and (if written earlier) it is conceivable that it arose out of a coy remark by the Baroness that the loves of middle life are affairs of the soul, but the terms of the poem are not

<sup>1</sup> Raymond suggests that the poem 'reads almost like a commentary' on something Browning wrote to Elizabeth in 1845 about his poetry giving 'truth broken into prismatic hues', and his fear of the 'pure white light'. This seems a long cast back, but he may have been reading over the *Letters*. I think the resemblance is merely verbal, and that the general tone of the poem rules out anything further, but the suggestion is an interesting one.

consistent with those of the proposal of marriage as Browning described it. More recently de Vane and Knickerbocker report that Mrs Bloomfield Moore told Browning at a party in 1884 that she 'had loved him with soul-love', and that Browning replied by a letter containing the first two lines of this poem:

*Not with my Soul, Love!—bid no Soul like mine  
Lap thee around nor leave the poor Sense room!*

Only these two lines are given, and it seems possible that he was quoting from his own poem, assuming it to have been written earlier. One would like to think it was written a great deal earlier: the feeling and phraseology come dubiously from a man of seventy-two, and the general impression is of a man troubled and floundering. Five years later he was out of the toils.

It may have been noticed that in the course of my observations on Browning's love poems I have made use of a distinction between 'romantic' love and 'true' love, on one occasion narrowing down the second expression by substituting 'married love'. I think the classification may legitimately be attempted. Romantic love is the theme and inspiration of nearly all the love-poetry of the world—from Sappho to Spenser and from Shelley to Swinburne, with the *Sonnets* eclipsing them all, as George Saintsbury would say. Romantic love is the greatest of the minor arts. It has its origins in sex-excitement, beauty and the mystery of woman, which last factor may be accentuated by differences of station, nationality or age. It does not connote marriage; indeed the idea of permanence, or, as they say, of a 'bond', would kill it dead. Think of the great tributes to love—*Troilus and Criseyde*, 'My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun', *To his Coy Mistress*, *Green Grow the Rashes O*, *Epipsychidion*, *On the Way to Kenilworth*, *Love in the Valley*, 'When you are old and gray and full of sleep'—the love that sings so passionately in these poems is essentially a thing in time, that glimmers and is gone, a Spring that will not wait for Autumn. Strange that passing love should breed undying verse. It is only in Browning, Patmore, Hardy, Henry King of *The Exequy*, and some of the women poets, that you recognize a love transcending time, including indeed romantic love and

all its elements, but with vital modifications and additions. It is passionate, but not with the egotistic passion of romantic love, possessing instead a passion of tenderness and devotion; it is still based on sex, but with the secondary aspects of sex predominating; delight in beauty is enlarged to a sympathetic understanding of and admiration for a whole personality and a desire to see it flower to completeness; unlike romantic love, which seems to be strongest when its object is indifferent, scornful, or otherwise out of reach, true love must be reciprocated, does not change, and bears within itself the seeds of immortality. In short, true love is the spirit of happy marriage, and it is the kind of love which is found in the poems of Robert Browning more fully and frequently expressed than in any other poet.

Santayana, that original philosopher and acute moralist, is strongly censorious of Browning because with him love is always passion, 'a passion of the imagination but never rising to contemplation'. He complains that Caponsacchi, giving evidence at the trial, refers to Pompilia as 'the woman there' (did he expect him to say 'the young person' or 'the disembodied spirit'?).<sup>1</sup> He is uneasy because Norbert tells Constance (*In a Balcony*), 'I worked because I loved you with my soul', and because the lovers in *Love among the Ruins* rush together thinking that 'love is best'. The objections seem to me to be based upon not a high but a warped view of love and human nature (and I cannot forbear to point out that Santayana, according to the biographical accounts, has not been married). He goes on to set up as the ideal of love in poetry the 'Platonic' love of Dante for Beatrice, which, he says, ceased to be a passion and became the energy of contemplation, diffusing over the universe tenderness and worship. But Santayana could not know what Browning knew—that true love in marriage, without ceasing to be a passion, can become exactly what he says, 'the energy of contemplation, diffusing over the universe tenderness and worship', just that precisely.

Let us call for witness W. R. Inge, who did, like Browning, know happy marriage, and whose judgment on Browning's love-poetry seems to me entirely sound. He admits—what indeed no one would dream of denying, or wish to deny—that 'It is distinctly sexual love, not Christian charity', that not only provides the inspiration for Browning's poetry of love but—'not in its origin but in its completed development'

<sup>1</sup> All the same, I do not know why Caponsacchi did not say 'Pompilia', with or without 'there' (VI. 2084). It reminds me of the 'Girl' in the (1805) *Prelude*, Book XI, who became first 'the Woman' and, in 1850, 'the Female'.

—possesses for Browning 'the key of life's real meaning'. Inge goes on to agree that 'love in its perfect state (and he clearly means the love of good and happily married people) is a principle of moral activity, a mode of the expansion of the self into universal and eternal relations'. He believes that 'love' is the purest form in which reality is presented to us', and so 'of immense importance in the growth of the soul'.

Whether Santayana likes it or not, this is the way in which love is exhibited in the most important of Browning's love poems. Love, true or romantic, can lead to mystic illumination, and though mysticism does not play a larger part in Browning's love poetry than it does in his philosophy, we have seen love inducing glimpses of mystic understanding in *By the Fire-side* and a few other poems, and shall see it inducing so much more than a glimpse in Caponsacchi and Pompilia that it is surprising that Santayana seems to have been totally blind to it. It is certainly creative, as A. R. Orage, in his little book, *On Love*, declares love must be. Orage distinguishes three grades of love—instinctive, emotional (my 'romantic', perhaps), and conscious, which last he says is always creative (not only or necessarily of children). The creativeness of love with Browning is seen not only in the great love-poems but in the central position given to love in the whole of his philosophy and religion. It entered into his happiness, and happiness itself is capable of being a mystic relation with life and God. Once Browning shows that he is not only aware of this but sees an element of danger in it. The Epilogue to *Ferishtah's Fancies* is a very personal utterance. He describes himself as 'a happy one', but says he cannot choose but be aware of the sorrows of the world, though the 'iridescent splendours' of his own happiness tend to shut them out. Having 'battled' in the cause of God he sees in vision 'all the good and beauty' of life, 'wonder crowning wonder'. Then the thought strikes him: Can all this 'joy and triumph', all the 'enchantment' and happiness, be due simply to the fact that his life has been enriched and made divine by love? A thought which has come inevitably to others besides Browning, without the 'terrifying' effect that it had on him. Love is not an accident, but an integral part of the miracle of life.

Had Santayana not been obsessed with the dominating majesty of Dante he might have enquired whether the slighter figure of Shelley would not have served for his foil to Browning. Without support from medieval Christianity, Shelley both practised a universal benevolence and set up the intellectual beauty of love as the active principle of

nature, merging his defiant Prometheus in an overriding power of triumphant universal love. Or he might have held up Wordsworth, who, perhaps because there was no profound sexual love in his life, speaks throughout his poetry in the name of a love which is intense and human yet impersonal and 'pervading': 'by love do we begin and end'; all truth and beauty comes 'from pervading love—that gone, we are as dust': a love that 'proceeds from the brooding soul, and is divine'. But it is an ignorant mistake to suppose that the 'larger love', what Shaw called 'the secret in the poet's heart', is axiomatically without rival. Browning is the poet who best shows the other kind. With him love was no indefinite principle: it was a terrific human experience, which not only transfigured his life but transformed his poetry, not so much stimulating his genius as giving it 'body', and turning him into a supreme love-poet and the most prolific, if not the most profound, writer of religious poetry of all our major poets. How foolish to complain that this poet drained the last drop of happiness, beauty, goodness and wisdom from an experience which, in its dual aspect of a perfect love for a perfect woman, has been granted, it would seem, to no other poet; and having thus drained the uttermost essence, put it all into imperishable verse, leaving the saints to exploit the virtues of contemplative charity. In the *Bhagavad-Gita* it is written: 'Aspirants may find enlightenment by two different paths. For the contemplative is the path of knowledge; for the active is the path of selfless action.'

Marriage did one final thing for Browning's poetry. It enabled it to achieve the imaginative feat of presenting the woman's point of view in the war, 'cold' or 'shooting', which—apparently—wages unceasingly between the sexes. This is a unique thing in poetry, outside poetic drama. The more usual approach is typified by *Modern Love*, where Meredith presented a 'ship-wrecked' marriage from the masculine angle: the wife's feelings are beautifully suggested, but only as facts to be critically observed by the husband, whose attitude is insufferable. We have seen how a similar 'ship-wreck' is handled by Browning in *James Lee's Wife*, and it is hardly necessary to draw attention to the contrasting magnanimity of the woman. Even more illuminating are the spiritual processes of the two wronged men in *The Worst of It* and *Too Late*, the first of whom seems to have been treated in the same way as the husband in *Modern Love* but keeps, like Mrs Lee, a great love undiminished. The behaviour of Meredith's husband is much more correct according to Victorian standards: *Modern Love* and the Browning



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poems with which I am comparing it were all written between 1860 and 1864. That Browning was a born feminist (to this extent) is shown in *The Flight of the Duchess* and *The Glove*, written before 1845, but the poems in which he let the spirit of woman speak for itself—*A Woman's Last Word*, *Any Wife*, *In a Year*, *Another Way of Love*, *Youth and Art*, *James Lee's Wife*, together with the general feeling shown in *Pippa Passes*, *The Ring and the Book*, *Balaustion's Adventure*, and *Fifine at the Fair*—these were the direct product of the profound spiritual experience of loving and marrying Elizabeth.

# ‘So far as my story

## I

ABOUT TWO-THIRDS of Browning's poetry has a narrative basis, and although the proportion seems a little surprising, a glance over the history of literature shows that the same thing can be said (reducing the fraction to ‘rather more than half’) of most of our major poets—Chaucer, Langland, Dunbar, Spenser, Milton, Scott, Coleridge, Byron, Keats, Tennyson, Morris. . . . Remembering too the dramatists and prose fiction writers, one cannot help wondering at the varied abundance of life that can provide material for this widespread passion to create something artistic out of all the crude rich stuff. The passion is not always pure: it may be adulterated with a desire to promote an idea, generally a moral one. This may even enter into the composition of the great form of story poem known as the epic. I do not propose to haggle over a precise definition, but shall regard as an epic any non-dramatic narrative poem of great length and serious treatment. This enables me to include not only the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, but *Idylls of the King*, *Aurora Leigh*, and *Sigurd the Volsung*. All of these have a pure narrative intention, with a minute admixture of allegory in the *Idylls* and of social purpose in *Aurora Leigh*. That the inspiration of a more definite religious or moral purpose need not detract from the greatness of the result is proved by the *Æneid*, *The Divine Comedy*, *The Faerie Queene*, *Paradise Lost*, *The Prelude* and *The Excursion*.

*The Ring and the Book* would seem to lie in the former class of epics, its intention being simply narrative. In the discussion of the poem which went on during the months of publication between Browning and Julia Wedgwood, Browning suggests that he intended the action and its group of actors to be representative—‘this chance lump taken as a sample of the soil’; he admitted that few besides himself would have cared to spread the lump out, but he had been struck not only with the ‘enormous wickedness and weakness of the main composition of the piece’ (which he insisted was a piece of God's world), but with the ‘incidental evolution of good thereby—good to the priest, to the poor girl, to the old Pope’. He challenges Julia to find six other people, engaged together in a remarkable action, with a greater preponderance

of good than is shown by the superiority of Pompilia, Caponsacchi and the Pope over the others. He must have been also attracted by the artistic finish given to the story by the inexorable justice which, distinctly against all human probability, overcame the crime.

This, however, does not amount to a moral purpose behind the epic. Neither does the discovery of an ideal love in the sordid story. This was indeed pure discovery, for the records of the crime and trial (which are as astonishingly complete and revealing as those of the trial of Joan of Arc that served Bernard Shaw so well) contain no hint of such. Herford, and other critics following him, make much of Pompilia being linked with Elizabeth in Browning's mind. I find it impossible to believe that Pompilia, the child of seventeen, is in Browning's representation intended to stand for Elizabeth, who had never to him been anything but a mature woman, but there can equally be little doubt that Caponsacchi's rescue of Pompilia was for Browning a dazzling symbol of his own elopement, and this will have provided the germ of a love-theme which he had to develop in order to bring his poem into line with the tradition which the epic poets, asking no leave of Aristotle, had adopted from the first.<sup>1</sup>

It is sad to think that this most ambitious of Browning's poems was or would have been so little to the taste of his admiring wife. He shared his father's interest in crime stories, otherwise he could hardly have been attracted by the unromantic records contained in his old square yellow book. Back in 1845 Elizabeth had shuddered at his interest in knives as instruments of murder, and now, as he told Julia Wedgwood afterwards, 'she never took the least interest in the story, so much as to wish to inspect the papers'; and it was not till she had been dead for some years that he began seriously to consider his find as the substance of a poem, a novel in verse. I seem to remember that Arnold Bennett called *Aurora Leigh* the finest novel of the mid-nineteenth century. I wonder what Robert thought of his wife's *magnum opus*. And I wonder whether *The Ring and the Book* was his reaction to it. If so, Aurora's tale stands

<sup>1</sup> The love-interest of the epic is never dominant, as in the novel, but is always a colourful motif. There is little enough love-making in the *Iliad*, but it was for Helen that the Trojan War was fought, and it was Agamemnon's 'pinching' of Briseis that occasioned the Wrath of Achilles. The terrific theological scheme of the *Divine Comedy* overshadows Dante's dream, yet Beatrice's nods and wreathed smiles make of the *Paradiso* (at least) the most human of epics. Just as Heaven and Hell almost crowd out Eden from *Paradise Lost*, yet the momentum of Eve's part may be gauged from that tremendous suggestion she makes to Adam out of the depth of their distress—that they shall refuse to bear a child, and so wipe out the race at its beginning and 'dish' their tyrannous creator.

uncrushed by the retort. It is the lesser work in that it is a limited temporal utterance, accepting the social and sex conventions of its period; the story is a less important one, and the style is, to some extent, derivative from Tennyson. But the style has an accomplished ease, and the story an artistic unity, denied to *The Ring and the Book*. Above all, *Aurora Leigh* is a tale of life not of death, and in short is a civilized poem.

Long ago, in one of the early *Letters*, Browning had surmised that not poetry but the stuff of poetry was to be found in the Italians—'material for poetry in the pitifullest romancist of their thousands'. Now, in the Franceschini papers, he had 'material' enough. But material only. In itself, said Carlyle, the story 'only wanted forgetting', with its central figure an unredeemed brute and its main action the dreadful persecution and horrible murder of a defenceless innocent. It had either to be left alone or turned into simply the most original epic ever written. This Browning did, firstly by making it a *personal* epic—by the addition of that 'alloy of imagination' to the 'pure crude gold' of fact, by reading something into Guido, Pompilia, Caponsacchi and the Pope that is entirely lacking in the records. But the originality lies even more in the handling—the almost maddeningly individual method of narration. As is well known, the story is told over and over again from half a score of points of view belonging to actors in the story and onlookers. Too much credit is sometimes given to Browning for the invention of the method, which was undoubtedly suggested to him by the succession of documents in the old yellow book and the secondary sources, but he adopted the method with a ruthless thoroughness which, in spite of an inevitable tiresomeness of repetition noticeable here and there, turned a grisly story into a work of art as surely as Rembrandt did with his flayed ox.

Browning apparently attached more importance to the maxim that well begun is half done than to the other which suggests that all's well that ends well, for while the Book XII of his epic is perfunctory, Book I is brilliant, even though, in spite of what is to come, the 'tale' is told no less than four times over already in this introduction. The description with which he begins, of the finding of the Book:

*Do you see this square old yellow Book I toss  
I' the air, and catch again, and twist about  
By the crumpled vellum covers,—pure crude fact  
Secreted from man's life when hearts beat hard,  
And brains, high-blooded, ticked two centuries since?*

is Browning of the very best vintage:

*This book,—precisely on that palace-step  
Which, meant for lounging knaves o' the Medici,  
Now serves re-venders to display their ware,—  
'Mongst odds and ends of ravage . . . these  
I picked this book from. Five compeers in flank  
Stood left and right of it as tempting more—  
A dogseared Spicilegium, the fond tale  
O' the Frail One of the Flower, by young Dumas,  
Vulgarized Horace for the use of schools,  
The Life, Death, Miracles of Saint Somebody,  
Saint Somebody Else, his Miracles, Death and Life,—  
With this, one glance at the lettered back of which,  
And 'Stall!' cried I: a lira made it mine.*

This is the beginning of his gradual re-creation of the Italian scene at the end of the seventeenth century. There follow, with interposing matter, those four brief versions of the wretched story of Guido and Pompilia: first, in 200 lines, a narration of the case as tried before the Governor of Rome; then, in 130 lines, an imaginative vision of the sequence of events as they present themselves to the poet, gazing from the terrace over Rome towards Arezzo; next a matter-of-fact summary of the story itself in forty lines; and lastly, in five hundred lines, a *résumé*, in some detail, of the next ten books in order as they are to come. It is all very business-like and methodical, but it is entirely successful, though we may afterwards find ourselves entertaining a wish that five of the ten books had been left at the *résumé*. But already the forecast has indicated two highlights: the summary of Pompilia's part is short and shy, as of an exquisite thing he is almost afraid to touch; in contrast there is a joyous power about the preliminary picture of the Pope's deciding part.

In one of the intervals among these four abridgements Browning expounds, somewhat laboriously, his conception of the 'ring', the alloy of imagination making the gold of fact into the subtler metal of art, a substance less pure but imperishable 'I fused my live soul with that inert stuff', concluding that 'Fancy with fact is just one fact the more' (a truth that has been questioned, but is surely the basis of all imaginative literature).

The blank verse, as the quotations show, has that colloquial genius in which Browning has no rival:

*With five—what we call qualities of bad,  
Worse, worst, and yet worse still, and still worse yet.*

But it can change to serene impressionistic description,

*Whence came the clear voice of the cloistered ones  
Chanting a chant made for midsummer nights—  
I know not what particular praise of God,  
It always came and went with June. Beneath  
I' the street, quick shown by openings of the sky  
When flame fell silently from cloud to cloud . . .  
The townsmen walked by twos and threes, and talked,  
Drinking the blackness in default of air;—*

or to that condensed narrative in which Shakespeare so often shows his mastery, and condensed argument, as when he gives the Pope's two thousand lines in a bare fifty, the greatness of the actual performance cleverly suggested. At this period there is normally (as with Meredith) a conscious 'difference' of style,

*Then with a skip as 'twere from heel to head,  
Leaving yourselves fill up the middle bulk  
O' the Trial, reconstruct its shape august,  
From such exordium clap we to the close;*

and in the absence of this the style is sometimes undistinguished. At all times it is capable of rising to a fine descriptive image: thus, for public opinion:

*the world's outcry  
Around the rush and ripple of my fact  
Fallen stonewise, plumb on the smooth face of things;  
The world's guess, as it crowds the banks o' the pool,  
At what were figure and substance, by their splash:  
Then, by vibrations in the general mind,  
At depth of deed already out of reach.*

Apart from a touch or two of religious feeling, there is no suggestion of a philosophy or a moral—nothing but narrative, with an insistence on the importance of its imaginative interpretation.

With Book II the effectiveness and at the same time the weakness of the scheme become clear. We have now the events that make up the tragedy presented through the eyes and apprehension of a person—supposed to represent one half of Rome—quite alien to Browning's mind; and certainly we must admire the completeness with which he assumes the mask, and the dramatic ingenuity of making the supposed listener to this 'sample speech' belong to the 'other Half-Rome', occasionally trying to thrust in a word about a 'cousin' who knows the real truth. It was doubtless necessary to invent a thoroughly revolting type to get the angle at all (and of course it is adumbrated in the 'Book'), but the coarse brutality, the blasphemous interpretation of Pompilia and her motives, the depraved language and imagery, the leering, evil-smelling gossip—all this makes very unpleasant reading.

*Had Guido . . . with that axe, if providence so pleased,  
Cloven each head, by some Rolando-stroke,  
In one clean cut from crown to clavicle,  
—Slain the priest-gallant, the wife-paramour,  
Sticking, for all defence, in each skull's cleft,  
The rhyme and reason of the stroke thus dealt,  
To-wit, those letters and last evidence  
Of shame, each package in its proper place,—  
Bidding, who pitied, undistend the skulls,—  
I say, the world had praised the man.*

Moreover it is difficult to believe that even a partisan of this order would have the effrontery to expect anyone to accept his picture of Guido as a harmless country gentleman, or his impudent explanation of the villain's final act of treachery in using the name Caponsacchi to get the door opened to him. The only quality this representative of Half-Rome shares with his creator is a certain garrulousness, a habit of padding out and blowing up his thoughts to unconscionable proportions, and the feeling at the end of the book is one of surfeit, though it concludes with some 200 lines of swift clear narrative.

A point of interest is that truth breaks willy-nilly through even this warped account now and then, as when the escaping couple are overtaken by Guido at the inn and Pompilia is awakened:

*Her defence? This. She woke, saw, sprang upright  
I' the middle and stood as terrible as truth. . . .*

And we have here the first account of the earlier trial, of Caponsacchi and Pompilia after their frustrated runaway adventure: in a clever 'speech' we are told how the Roman law viewed the incident—and a reasonable, kindly, civilized view it was, as was also the quick decision to transfer Pompilia from the sisterhood to Pietro's house. It is doubtful whether England of the twentieth century would have dealt more promptly, justly and mercifully with the case than seventeenth-century Italy did. A later Book, giving a shorter and better account of this trial, concludes with justifiable pride, 'That's Rome's way!'

As 'Half-Rome' comes to its uncomfortably protracted conclusion one cannot help wondering if this false, cynical, callously prejudiced view needed putting at all, or at such length. It seems a painful exercise in ingenuity. And then, as we begin Book III, we realize the *raison d'être* of Book II. The last but one of the variations in Beethoven's E major Sonata (Opus 109) is so jarringly harsh that I always have to resist a temptation to omit it, but when it ends and the re-statement of the lovely tranquil theme follows I know why the other was there. So with the present case. The inexpressible pleasure of the opening of Book III is greatly enhanced by relief and contrast, and the glorious verse-paragraph containing the tender picture of Pompilia comes with creative healing after the brutalities we have been enduring.

*Another day that finds her living yet,  
Little Pompilia, with the patient brow  
And lamentable smile on those poor lips,  
And, under the white hospital-array,  
A flower-like body, so frighten at a bruise  
You'd think, yet now, stabbed through and through again,  
Alive in the ruins. 'Tis a miracle.  
It seems that, when her husband struck her first,  
She prayed Madonna just that she might live  
So long as to confess and be absolved;  
And whether it was that, all her sad life long,  
Never before successful in a prayer,  
This prayer rose with authority too dread,—  
Or whether, because earth was hell to her,*



*By compensation, when the blackness broke  
She got one glimpse of quiet and the cool blue,  
To show her for a moment such things were,—  
Or else,—as the Augustinian Brother thinks,  
The friar who took confession from her lip,—  
When a probationary soul that moves  
From nobleness to nobleness, as she,  
Over the rough way of the world, succumbs,  
Bloodstains its last thorn with unflinching foot,  
The angels love to do their work betimes,  
Staunch some wounds here nor leave so much for God.  
Who knows? However it be, confessed, absolved,  
She lies, with overplus of life beside  
To speak and right herself from first to last,  
Right the friend also, lamb-pure, lion-brave,  
Care for the boy's concerns, to save the son  
From the sire, her two-weeks' infant orphaned thus,  
And—with best smile of all reserved for him—  
Pardon that sire and husband from the heart.  
A miracle, so tell your Molinists!*

This is, however, not one of the great books. Style and diction (after the opening) are still on the whole unpretentious, as befits a citizen, though it is dignified and has dropped excessive colloquialism. For the first time we get an account of the affair both detailed and credible. The monstrous distortions of *Half-Rome* are not replaced by bias of another sort: there is no glozing of the fact that Pompilia is 'the bastard of a prostitute'; Pietro and Violante, whose part looked so black in Book II, are transfigured, almost amusing, but Violante is shown as the mover of mischief, while Pietro is a weak fool; and on their 'well-meant' doings the comment is made:

*To which demand the dreadful answer comes—  
For that same deed, now at Lorenzo's church  
Both agents, conscious and unconscious, lie;  
While she, the deed was done to benefit,  
Lies also, the most lamentable of things . . .*

When the witness comes to Pompilia's situation, with Guido trying to

force her to go off with Caponsacchi, the narration is still made with factual restraint, yet terror broods over it. There is a quite remarkable refusal to pre-judge even this issue: the confessor has said that the voice of God asserts the innocence of the runaway transaction, and tears are evoked by the image of the trapped bird,

*But we, who hear no voice, and have dry eyes,  
Must ask,—we cannot else, absolving her,—  
How of the part played by that same decoy  
In the catching, caging?*

—that is, of Caponsacchi; and there is even a touch of cynicism in the suggestion that—since of all who visit Pompilia on her death-bed, 'Half at the least are, call it how you will, in love with her'—it is not improbable that love had something to do with the rescue.

Doubts having been disposed of, the meeting of Pompilia and Caponsacchi is done with telling brevity, and the brilliantly swift narrative of the escape pauses only for a moment while the purity of their motives is established:

*Wife and priest alike reply  
'This is the simple thing it claims to be,  
A course we took for life and honour's sake,  
Very strange, very justifiable.'*

At the point on the flight where Pompilia insists she can go no further, must sleep, however near Rome on the one hand or Guido on the other, one wishes Caponsacchi could have been steel and forced her to go on. But we begin to get the features of the priest, ready to be built into the great portrait of Books VI and VII, and we have too the first suggestion of the 'mother' motive in Pompilia which later grows important.

Parts of *The Other Half-Rome* are just a necessary rehabilitation of the story sketched in Book I, which *Half-Rome* had daubed with filth. Our second citizen is no partisan (except where Pompilia is concerned)—his statement is as nearly dispassionate as possible. He is no idealist, but a worldling on the side of truth, and his sifting and assessing of possibilities are almost too frigid. Nevertheless the calm unbiased narrative leads to a final fierce judgment on Guido:

*out with you  
From the common light and air and life of man!*

Book IV is disappointing. We were told in Book I that after two ignorant and prejudiced citizens we were to be given 'the elaborated product, *tertium quid* . . . the finer sense o' the city', 'a reasoned statement . . . clarity of candour, history's soul, the critical mind, in short'. This variety of outlook has no foundation in the old Yellow Book or the pamphlets of the secondary source: it is Browning's own interpolation (could its origin have been the need to make up the number of Books to twelve?), and had a promising sound. What do we find? A view so coldly, cynically impartial that it approximates to the criminal one-sidedness of Half-Rome. For instance the references to Pompilia are no less callous, and an absurd respect is shown for Guido's aristocratic pretensions. This 'man of quality' is displaying, quite ineffectually so far as we are concerned, his caustical powers for the benefit of an 'Excellency' and a 'Highness' afterwards dismissed as 'two idiots'. He takes, perforce, the same incidents and finds more to say about them but nothing illuminating. Repetition is unavoidable, but there is extraordinary virtuosity in the retelling from a slightly different angle. Here and there some new fact emerges (this is true of all the Books—each clarifies one or more facts previously obscure). Thus it is now pointed out that Violante's lie about Pompilia's birth at least saved her from the hell of a prostitute girlhood, that Guido's pretence of jealousy of Caponsacchi is inconsistent with his encouragement of Pompilia to clope with him; that Guido's arrest was due to Pompilia's being (to Guido's amazement) still alive to denounce him.

The lack of sympathy with Pompilia and her plight is patent. The Quid says her friends adduce her answered prayer and 'the miracle of continued life',

*As attestation to her probity.  
Does it strike your Excellency? Why, your Highness,  
The self-command and even the final prayer,  
Our candour must acknowledge explicable  
As easily by the consciousness of guilt;*

he follows this with vile innuendoes as to her revengeful motives and (especially) of a possible private confession of discreditable facts not

contained in the public one;<sup>1</sup> and he quibbles brazenly over her cruel rejection by Governor and Archbishop, asking how the penniless Guido could have influenced them. Yet the man is an artist, and must salute beauty where it shines:

*An old good easy creditable sire,  
A careful housewife's beaming bustling face,  
Both wrapped up in the love of their one child,  
The strange tall pale beautiful creature grown  
Lily-like out o' the cleft in the sun-smit rock  
'To bow its white miraculous birth of buds  
I' the way of wandering Joseph and his spouse—  
So painters fancy: here it was a fact. . . .*

He has too a gift of putting truth into a line: he sizes up the bargain made by Guido and Violante—"The rank on this side and the cash on that", and after 1200 lines of sophistry about the marriage and the flight he says, significantly for the whole story, 'Move to the murder, never mind the rest!'

And this is what Browning now does. With Book V we pass from gossipry to the evil heart of the matter, Guido himself. The change is reflected in the style. Colloquialism disappears, diction and verse become dignified and formal: the man is deadly serious, and pleading for his life. This is not the 'little, long-nosed, bushy-bearded, lantern-jawed' uncultivated lout of history, but the 'figure Browning created, and allowed Tertium Quid to delineate:

*You see the man was Aretine, had touch  
O' the subtle air that breeds the subtle wit;  
Was noble too, of old blood thrice refined . . .*

He makes a clever advocate's speech, more effective than that of his all too learned counsel, with a prelude which is four parts soft-soap, two of bragging, two of self-pity and two of snarls. He pleads 'guilty with extreme provocation', makes no effort to conceal his coarse hatred of Pompilia and his maniacal hatred of Pietro and Violante, and with supreme effrontery ends his opening with 'Now for truth!'

<sup>1</sup> This possibility has been taken very seriously by at least one American commentator, whose efforts remind me of a once popular picture called *The Man with the Muck-rake*.

He begins his defence proper like a sermon—'In the name of the undivided Trinity!' and is presently comparing himself to St Francis and even to Christ. He is a terrible wind-bag—the hundred lines he spends on his 'family' could easily have gone into ten—and an interminable proser when self-pity is uppermost. One of his faults, the incredibly long, grammatically correct but breathless sentences, thirty lines in length, belongs not to him but to Browning, and dates from *Sordello*. There is some inevitable re-hashing, and some irrelevant bluster. But one has to admit the man can talk: saying he was advised to seek a wife in Rome:

*I turned alike from the hill-side zig-zag thread  
Of way to the table-land a soldier takes,  
Alike from the low-lying pasture-place  
Where churchmen graze and recline and ruminate,  
—I ventured to mount no platform like my lords  
Who judge the world, bear brain I dare not brag—  
But stationed me, might thus the expression serve,  
As who should fetch and carry, come and go,  
Meddle and make i' the cause my lords love most—  
The public weal, which hangs to the law, which holds  
By the Church, which happens to be through God himself.*

His imagery is commonplace, and when he rises to a brilliant figure he fails to see it is false:

*With a wife I look to find all wifeliness,  
As when I buy, timber and twig, a tree—  
I buy the song o' the nightingale inside.*

The new fact contributed by Guido is that Pompilia had charged his brother, a priest, with making love to her. Thus by way of introduction to a hundred lines that are one long snarl:

*When I find  
That pure smooth egg which, laid within my nest,  
Could not but hatch a comfort to us all,  
Issues a cockatrice for me and mine,  
Do you stare to see me stamp on it?*

With shameless audacity he quotes the incriminating letters, admits they were forgeries—and asks, ‘What of it?’ He wrote the words and made Pompilia trace them—as a priest takes a sick man’s hand and makes him cross himself! On the whole the speech is no defence, because unconvincing—just a tissue of obvious lies. Its one impressive moment is that in which Guido turns on the court and accuses it of culpable leniency in its earlier sentence on the runaways, banishing Caponsacchi from Rome for a few years and entrusting Pompilia to the care of a sisterhood:

*Your award—*

*Who chop a man’s right-hand off at the wrist  
For tracing with forefinger words in wine  
O’ the table of a drinking-booth that bear  
Interpretation as they mocked the Church!  
—Who brand a woman black between the breasts  
For sinning by connection with a Jew:  
While for the Jew’s self—pudency be dumb!  
You mete out punishment such and such, yet so  
Punish the adultery of wife and priest!*

He comes to the birth of Pompilia’s child. He has decided to make this, the effect of it on him, the backbone of his defence. At first he is not sure which effect he is to show as the operative one—that the ‘persecution’ of which he has complained was to be continued in his son, or the suspicion of illegitimacy. The previous commentators had dealt variously with this point. Half-Rome said the birth of a son drove him mad. Other Half-Rome said it set him to work calculating the result of the new factor. Tertium Quid admitted both possibilities, and Guido now protests a mind disturbed by the confusion of a situation which might mean one thing or another. On the probability of ‘persecution’ being transferred from him to his son he is so revolting in his hypocrisy that one doubts whether even the Guido here drawn could have sustained the part. He says the poison hitherto used on his ‘coarse flesh’ was now to be used to ‘corrode the brow’:

*The baby-softness of my first-born child—  
The child I had died to see though in a dream,  
The child I was bid strike out for, beat the wave  
And baffle the tide of troubles where I swam,*

*So I might touch shore, lay down life at last  
At the feet so dim and distant and divine  
Of the apparition, as 'twere Mary's Babe . . .*

But his eloquence grows, and the persuasive oratory gradually rises to poetry as he tells how he decided to go to Rome, and as they rode

*when at intervals the cloud  
Of horror about me opened to let in life,  
I listened to some song in the ear, some snatch  
Of a legend, relic of religion, stray  
Fragment of record very strong and old  
Of the first conscience, the anterior right,  
The God's-gift to mankind, impulse to quench  
The antagonistic spark of hell and tread  
Satan and all his malice into dust,  
Declare to the world the one law, right is right.  
Then the cloud re-encompassed me, and so  
I found myself, as on the wings of winds,  
Arrived: I was at Rome on Christmas Eve.*

He tries to explain away the treachery of the call of 'Caponsacchi!' at the door; blasphemously claims God's approval—

*I heard Himself prescribe,  
That great Physician, and dared lance the core  
Of the bad ulcer;*

declares he stands acquitted; and in a last passionate outburst of oratory urges: 'Absolve me then . . . give me my life . . . give me my son.' The concluding lines positively drip with oiliness.

With Guido's first book the real drama has begun. He has not shaken our certainty that he is guilty. He justifies himself only to himself—'I wasn't going to stand for this, and can you blame me?' The answer is that we can and we do. He is damned in the two filthiest of all the sins, pride and cruelty. But our desire is increased to see how the truth will be presented by Caponsacchi and Pompilia. We have been given three 'angles', and now a marvellous picture of a foxy unscrupulous villain, fighting for his life with every nerve at the stretch, turning from trick to

trick with consummate skill, and watching his judges closely for the effect of each new attempt. But still we wait for truth.

With Caponsacchi, in Book VI, we pass from the literature of brilliance to that of sublimity, the eternally worth while. Once again the whole mood changes. The gripping, freezing power of the opening paragraph is terrific. We are serious at last. This is tragedy, and we have been gossiping, arguing, prevaricating. '*Pompilia is dying while I speak*'. Caponsacchi brings the dreadful truth to the middle of the stage—'it fills the universe'. And, he insists, it is due to the irresponsibility of the law, which must have seen that Guido was a devil, yet left him loose while restraining Caponsacchi.

Very soon we are in the presence of that mystic love which Santayana looked in vain for. There are twenty or more passages one could quote—I select a few and leave them to speak for themselves:

q But she—

*The glory of life, the beauty of the world,  
The splendour of heaven, . . . well, Sirs, does no one move?  
Do I speak ambiguously? The glory, I say,  
And the beauty, I say, and the splendour, still say I,  
Who, a priest, trained to live my whole life long  
On beauty and splendour, solely at their source,  
God,—have thus recognized my food in one,  
You tell me, is fast dying while we talk.*

★ ★ ★

*stay thought from smirching her,  
The snow-white soul that angels fear to take  
Untenderly. But, all the same, I know  
I too am taintless, and I bare my breast.*

★ ★ ★

*Now, when I found out first that life and death  
Are means to an end, that passion uses both.  
Indisputably mistress of the man  
Whose form of worship is self-sacrifice . . . ,*

★ ★ ★

*till, at last,  
When the ecstatic minute must bring birth,  
Began a whiteness in the distance, waxed*



*Whiter and whiter, near grew and more near,  
Till it was she: there did Pompilia come:  
The white I saw shine through her was her soul's,  
Certainly, for the body was one black,  
Black from head down to foot.*

★ ★ ★

*minutes with a memory in each,  
Recorded motion, breath or look of hers,  
Which poured forth would present you one pure glass,  
Mirror you plain,—as God's sea, glassed in gold,  
His saints,—the perfect soul Pompilia.*

★ ★ ★

*You know this is not love, Sirs,—it is faith,  
The feeling that there's God, he reigns and rules  
Out of this low world: that is all; no harm!*

The real story of the rescue—what we have been waiting for—beginning with the first sight of each other in the theatre, is of absorbing interest. The truth about the letters (worked up in so masterly a fashion by Browning), the growth of the impression of the priest as St George—all this and much more might very profitably be dwelt on, but the essence of this Book, what gives it an individual nobility, is that it is all concerned with the influence of Pompilia on Caponsacchi. The priest, a good man with the seeds of greatness, but entirely lacking in serious purpose, sees—just sees—a girl whose lovely face is dim beside the perfect beauty of her soul: he is instantly raised to his highest power by mystic love. His whole life and being are henceforth dedicated to her and the goodness and beauty she represents and embodies. Julia Wedgwood found some good words for Caponsacchi's feeling: 'When a woman leans upon a man's disinterested tenderness, and finds a love that ends with itself. . . ' I see no reason why this should not be recognized as a situation spiritually akin to that of Dante and Beatrice (it is an interesting coincidence that the mother of Beatrice was a Caponsacchi). We have already seen that Browning found consolation in the parallel between Dante's hopes and his own of reunion, and he undoubtedly got his understanding of Caponsacchi's elevated spiritual state from the effect of his first meeting with Elizabeth. Whether Elizabeth's influence on her husband in any way resembled that of Pompilia on Caponsacchi is not

clear. But surely the agonized cry with which Caponsacchi brings his speech to an end comes direct from the heart of Browning's personal loss:

*Just as a drudging student trims his lamp . . .  
 Dreams . . .  
 Then smilingly, contentedly, awakes  
 To the old solitary nothingness,  
 So I, from such communion, pass content.  
 O great, just, good God! Miserable me!*

The *Giuseppi Caponsacchi* was a great book; the *Pompilia* is a greater. Even the fiery priest had his moments of irrelevance: this is all milk of the word. As she begins to tell her story, to make her deposition, to those who have come to the hospital to take it down—'I am just seventeen years and five months old'<sup>1</sup>—her mind is full of the thought of her baby: strange, high thoughts and feelings, but not beyond the capacity of a girl of this kind, whose qualities reveal themselves gradually as she speaks: utter simplicity, a touch of smiling humour even yet—*quand même*, deep understanding achieved through love, implicit religious faith, tolerance and forgiveness and a marvellous acceptance of life:

*one cannot judge  
 Of what has been the ill or well of life,  
 The day that one is dying—sorrows change  
 Into not altogether sorrow-like,  
 I do see strangeness but scarce misery,  
 Now it is over, and no danger more.  
 My child is safe; there seems not so much pain . . .  
 One cannot both have and not have, you know,—  
 Being right now, I am happy and colour things.  
 Yes, everybody that leaves life sees all  
 Softened and bettered: so with other sights:  
 To me at least was never evening yet  
 But seemed far beautifuller than its day,  
 For past is past.*

<sup>1</sup> Some dates: Pompilia—born 17th July 1680, married December 1693 (at thirteen and a half), fled 29th April 1697, died 2nd January 1698 (seventeen and a half), Caponsacchi—born May 1673, was twenty-four when he rescued Pompilia; Guido was twenty-two years older than Pompilia, and forty at his death, but Browning, depending on his 'secondary source', makes him ten years older.

I have seen it complained that Pompilia speaks Browning's thoughts. Is it possible that there can be anyone who so exaggerates the gift of years as to suppose that a girl with Pompilia's experience and the soul of a saint cannot know what may even be hidden from a man of sixty? Do not the experts tell us that intelligence is as high as it will ever go at sixteen, and was it not Asquith (I think) who said that youth's one defect is that it lacks a past? With a 'past' close-packed with the knowledge of life, happy in childhood and terrible in adolescence, Pompilia uses simple words to voice world-wisdom in the passage quoted. When she says that the four years of her marriage are forgotten like a bad dream, and adds:

*This is the note of evil, for good lasts,*

she speaks a truth that Browning himself never fully learned.

It is not till half-way through the book that she begins to speak of Caponsacchi, about whom her friends have been gently jocular, assuming him to be Pompilia's lover. But she too denies love in the ordinary sense, and defends Caponsacchi in a beautiful figure:

*That man, you misinterpret and misprize—  
... where I point you, through the crystal shrine,  
Purity in quintessence, one dew-drop,  
You all descry a spider in the midst.*

It is fascinating to compare with Caponsacchi's her account of the transactions that led up to the escape, and the journey itself. There is first that intriguing scene in the theatre: both dwell on the single look they exchanged and the profound impression each made on the other. Caponsacchi told how she turned, 'Looked my way, smiled the beautiful sad strange smile' that burnt itself into his brain. She says that she first noticed her husband's cousin, fat waggish Conti, and then:

*the other, silent, grave,  
Solemn almost, saw me, as I saw him.*

And she thought:

*Had there been a man like that,  
To lift me with his strength out of all strife  
Into the calm, how I could fly and rest!*

Next comes the period before they met. He knew all about the letters, she only what she was told by Guido's woman, Margherita. He told how he finally decided to go and confront Guido, but found Pompilia instead; she says that, having joyfully realized her pregnancy, she determined to escape to Rome, and asked advice of Conti, who said, 'try Caponsacchi—he's St George', so Margherita was told to say he might come, but Caponsacchi evidently arrived before the message could be delivered—we may attribute the 'coincidence' to telepathy if we choose.

There is a slight easily explicable discrepancy over the actual meeting. Caponsacchi says he went to the palace after dark, walked on the terrace and saw her standing at a window holding a lamp, and she came down to him on the terrace. She says she knew all day something was going to happen—a star was to be born—and in the evening she felt 'pushed' out on to the terrace, where she found Caponsacchi. For what they said to each other, Caponsacchi gives her speech in 150 lines, she in twenty-five (he might remember every word, she only the gist—that she was in danger and wanted to be taken to Rome); according to him he replied by making arrangements to return next evening—her account is this:

*He replied—*

*The first word I heard ever from his lips,  
All himself in it,—an eternity  
Of speech, to match the immeasurable depths  
O' the soul that thus broke silence—'I am yours'.*

This is how it appeared to her. She also thought she had included in her communication a reference to the child she carried, but apparently Caponsacchi did not get this—he tells later how he gradually learnt it on the journey in the carriage.

In the accounts of the journey, Caponsacchi is concerned to remember and report everything Pompilia said and did, while she dwells on the confidence she felt in her rescuer. She says that at one point where they rested at a wayside house Caponsacchi brought to her a tiny baby and put it into her arms; Caponsacchi's account had said he found her holding the baby (in her memories she attributed everything to him). These and other discrepancies are of course in the highest degree dramatic. They correspond to the two small discrepancies in the evidence as given in the Yellow Book records, where Caponsacchi says they

reached Castelnovo in the evening and that Pompilia slept soundly there for some hours, while Pompilia declared it was dawn when they arrived and that she did not sleep at all; both mistakes on her part are easily accounted for. In any case the parallel yet different stories present an astonishing dramatic achievement. Doubtless all the preceding sor-did pictures were desirable in order to make these two wonderful books stand out in double pre-eminence. A tragic episode presented through the eyes and minds of two divinely great and beautiful souls, it reaches poetic heights, and not seldom the moving passion of lyric. When we remember that Browning showed the evil figure of Guido with no less penetration, we cannot deny him huge dramatic powers which might not have been suspected from his plays.

His sympathetic entering into the character of Pompilia enables us to discount the 'crime' attraction of the story and allow that even more force attached to the glimpse of the soul of the young girl afforded in the records by the testimony of the Augustinian confessor to the 'innocent and saintly conscience in that ever-blessed child'. On to this Browning grafted the sense of motherhood and the love for Caponsacchi, which is more freely expressed than his for her, but no less mystic.

*I did pray, do pray, in that prayer shall die,  
'Oh, to have Caponsacchi for my guide,  
Ever the face upturned to mine, the hand  
Holding my hand across the world.'*<sup>1</sup>

She 'could' believe himself by his strong will' created all the fortunate circumstances of the flight—'him I now see make the shine everywhere'; until Guido came, 'master by hell's right', and she saw 'my angel helplessly held back'. 'Ever with Caponsacchi!' she cries—'O lover of my life, O soldier saint!' . . . She acknowledges that when the knock came at Pietro's door on the fatal night, 'It was the name of him I sprang to meet. . . . He is ordained to call and I to come!' She foresees the mystic marriage in heaven when they shall, 'Be as the angels rather, who, apart, know themselves into one'. Mr Cohen excellently sees this as Browning's own interpretation of Christ's reply.

Pompilia, in her historical character, has been made the subject of 'research' by critics who have apparently found it difficult to believe

that anything so bright could be real. Some of these investigators have found what they wanted, but even if Pompilia was not, in fact, faultless, even if her short and troubled life was not quite free from moral lapses, the records of them are ambiguous, and neutralized by the testimony of Fra Celestino Angelico; if she really wrote the letters, as Professor J. E. Shaw<sup>1</sup> thinks he has 'proved', Browning was not aware of this, so that his vision of her stands unimpaired.

Apart from the pure goodness, the mother-love, and the intuitive wisdom, the portrait in no way suggests Elizabeth. Neither does one suppose Browning saw himself as Caponsacchi, the 'soldier-saint', though no doubt the rescue pricked his scars. The presentation of these two heroically beautiful figures outweighs all the evil, and justifies Browning in the choice of the grim chronicle for the basis of his masterpiece.

Nearly all tragedies have their comic relief, and so *The Ring and the Book* has its two lawyers, whose (written) harangues are best read as a satire on the law. Neither the Fisc nor the Procurator of the Poor is in the remotest way moved by the ghastly murder or the pitiful state of its victim. Even counsel for the prosecution is full of facetious references to 'our Pompilia', to the 'Pompilian plaint' aggravating the 'Guidonian ire', and the like. Though the forensic acrobatics provide a foil to the two beautiful books that precede and the noble one that follows, I think the slackening of tension is too sudden and too complete. It is dreadful to find oneself back with the petty considerations of Books II to IV: the tattling pros and cons of the market-place translated into legal form, with such argumentative feebleness that they can hardly have affected the judgment. However, Browning was a humorist as well as all the other things, and he was too the cleverest manipulator of ten syllables in a line who ever wrote. The skill and ease with which he interweaves his law Latin, accompanied by its translation, is fascinating to watch, but I at least feel after a few hundred lines that I am willing to take the trick as demonstrated.

One new fact is brought out—that Guido put the rusty edge on murder by trying to get out of paying his accomplices. The best thing in Book VIII is the Procurator's domestic side—his recurrent longing to be home with his wife and child; and in Book IX the little prologue, where the Fisc wishes that instead of writing he might be permitted to move the judges with a genuine piece of spoken oratory.

<sup>1</sup> An essay in the Publications of the Modern Language Association of America referred to by W. O. Raymond.

And so we come to the Pope, whose lengthily considered judgment is generally regarded as the highlight of the epic. Like the two Guido speeches, it is entirely the product of Browning's brain: the records contain no reference to an utterance by Innocent XII: his relation to the case was a negative one—the Court pronounced sentence, the Pope might have allowed Guido benefit of clergy, he did not do so, and the sentence went forward. Browning supposes that some thought must have gone even to this neglect to intervene, so he makes himself Pope and broods. It is a meditative book, and some of the narrative and dramatic inspiration has gone. There are a number of passages which give noble expression to noble feeling, but in the main the verse lacks distinction. A weakness is that everything is so obvious: the conclusions, in detail and as finality, could have been no other; only once is there a moment of suspense.

The meditation falls into three parts. The first thousand lines are a review of the evidence, during which Guido's contentions are dismissed one by one. The beginning is remarkably fine, with our Pope leaning on a long line of earlier Popes. But the effect is spoilt by the choice of one set of Papal judgments, exhibiting the shocking behaviour of a succession of Popes (belonging, as a matter of fact, to the most disgraceful period in the history of the Papacy). Satire is implicit, but ought Browning to have made the Pope his mouthpiece? However, the idea is clearly—I must do better than this!

*Now, my turn!*

*In God's name! . . .*

And almost immediately he settles our doubts by stating the opinion he has come to.

*The case is over, judgment at an end,  
And all things done now and irrevocable:  
A mere dead man is Franceschini here . . .  
I have worn through this sombre wintry day,  
With winter in my soul beyond the world's,  
Over these dismalest of documents . . .  
All's a clear rede and no more riddle now . . .  
Therefore there is not any doubt to clear  
When I shall write the brief word presently  
And chink the hand-bell . . .*

His own life, of eighty-four hard-pressed years, is a frail one; he is a 'grey ultimate decrepitude'; and an observer might well calculate his death as likely to come long before Guido's.

*No, it will be quite otherwise: to-day,  
Is Guido's last—my term is yet to run.*

So he proceeds to take Guido's life to pieces and finds it evil at every point—he 'believes in just the vile of life'. His marriage is a test case, with every action and thought steeped in craft, meanness, cruelty and self-interest. Yet Guido had been fortified by propitious circumstance, 'Great birth, good breeding, with the Church for guide'.

The Pope's sympathy with Pompilia is clear from the start—'the lamb-like child his prey', 'the pale awe-stricken wife, past hope of help'. He notes how Guido got a chance to desist from evil by reason of the verdict at the first trial, but the birth of a son spurred him to complete his wickedness. The wise old head overlooks nothing (the 'letters' have already been dismissed as self-evident forgeries)—the jagged knife used for the murders, the rustic simplicity of the accomplices. One astonishing fact—Guido's neglect to arrange for horse-transport to escape from the scene of the murder, a mistake which made possible his arrest—this the Pope takes to be God's pull on the rein, 'the monitory touch o' the tether', only afterwards 'recognized for God's'.

*Why, the first urchin tells you, to leave Rome,  
Get horses, you must show the warrant, just  
The banal scrap, clerk's scribble, a fair word buys . . .*

So he indicts not only Guido and his two brothers, but the mother of the three—'the hag that gave these three abortions birth' (no mealy-mouthed ecclesiastic this)—and also the flint-faced Governor and the hireling Archbishop, concerning the last of whom he concludes grimly, 'With thee at least anon the little word!'

The shorter second part of the meditation might be called the light amid the darkness—'the strange beauty-beam' which is always there 'to the despair of hell'. There is Pompilia, 'perfect in whiteness', a solace to the soul of 'the poor old Pope, heart-sick at having all his world to blame': this 'woman-child', the one flower in his garden, sprung from a 'chance-sown seed';



*My flower,  
My rose, I gather for the breast of God!*

And there is Caponsacchi—

*my warrior-priest, in whom  
What if I gain the other rose, the gold,  
We grave to imitate God's miracle?*

He goes on to a fine appreciation of the priest's qualities, but cannot forbear, as Pope, to chide his adventures in motley, and shakes his head over some supposed excess of passion during the escape due to Pompilia's 'perfect beauty of body and soul'. Our knowledge of these two is more intimate than the Pope's: he has not heard them insisting on the mystic love that drove out all other.

So far the evidence, bright and dark. The last 800 lines display the moral and religious grounds for the judgment the Pope is about to pass. He feels he has been chosen, with God's approval, and with a sense of right and wrong derived from God, to take God's place as judge, and he meditates deeply, but after Browning's own confused fashion, on the place of power and goodness in the function of God. He is more concerned with the general state of mankind than with this isolated instance, and asks whether Christianity has effected the salvation God ordained: has it made any difference at all? He himself does not despair:

*Put no such dreadful question to myself,  
Within whose circle of experience burns  
The central truth, Power, Wisdom, Goodness,—God.*

But he calls upon the witness of Euripides, and imagines him saying.

*. . . 'I, of body as of soul complete,  
A gymnast at the games, philosopher  
I' the schools, who painted, and made music,—all  
Glories that met upon the tragic stage  
When the Third Poet's tread surprised the Two.—  
Whose lot fell in a land where life was great  
And sense went free and beauty lay profuse,*

*I, untouched by one adverse circumstance,  
 Adopted virtue for my rule of life,  
 Waived all reward, and loved for loving's sake,  
 And, what my heart taught me, I taught the world,  
 And have been teaching now two thousand years.'*

Surely the way to virtue should be easier now that the true light has been revealed. But the Pope believes in the benefit of doubt and danger, and looks forward to a testing of faith and a new conception of God, one based perhaps on an instinctive belief. Yet such a faith has its risks. A Pompilia may hold fast to truth by her natural goodness; a Caponsacchi, depending on his own impulses and forsaking the rule of the Church, goes right: but Guido and his clerical brothers, by the same light, live only for lust and ambition.

Then suddenly we find the Pope allowing all the old pro-Guido arguments to come before his mind again: Guido was saving his honour, he belongs to the Church, he represents the structure of society based on the dominance of husband over wife, for shedding all this blood may darken the Church's good name—let the Pope's last act be an act of mercy. It is another temptation in the wilderness, and for a moment we wonder what is going to happen. But with a sudden *Retro Sathana* he settles the business in good primitive fashion, making all the argument unnecessary:

*Quis pro Domino?*  
*. . . I may die this very night,*  
*And how should I dare die, this man let live?*

His Holiness Innocent XII, historically one of the best of the Popes, comes out a good, honest, strong-charactered old man, giving ample and convincing (but not contemporary or Catholic) grounds for the right and only possible decision to which he had already come. I fancy the unbounded admiration which Book X has evoked among the commentators is due essentially to the noble human figure created by Browning, but the admiration has transferred itself to the substance of his soliloquy, which is said to sum up all Browning's philosophy, and to constitute 'one of the greatest examples of constructive religious [elsewhere "metaphysical"] thought in nineteenth-century poetry' (Raymond). The comparative estimate is not impressive, since there

are (fortunately) few examples of constructive religious thought on a large scale in the poetry of any century, but analysis of the ideas put forth does not justify the excessive tribute to Browning as a theologian. Nevertheless his Pope is a great Christian. He did not strike fire on his creator as Pompilia and Caponsacchi did, and Book X lacks high poetic inspiration, but it competes with Book VII and one other for the second place after Book VI, Pompilia's. The other is the next book, Guido's second round.

*The Ring and the Book* itself, in conception and execution, is a *tour de force* of the first magnitude, but within its framework Book XI proclaims an even more astonishing exercise of sheer power. Guido had already, in one of the longest of the twelve books, exhausted, one might have supposed, every possible argument in his own behalf, but now, in the longest book of all, he finds an entirely new set of pleas, and argues them with fluency and passion. But there is a difference. Guido knows his doom has been pronounced and confirmed—there is no more need for pretence—it is a matter of using all the force that is in him to show exactly what he is and how he sees himself in the hope that someone will be sufficiently impressed by the scarifying virtuosity of the performance to think the performer worth saving. He can now be nakedly himself—the soul of evil, the genius of wickedness; and as such he looms dark and great—until the bubble is pricked by terror. This idea of the genius of evil took hold of Browning as Satan took hold of Milton—and it is not to be forgotten that Satan, too, in the end turned into a hissing grovelling serpent. The result for Browning is a Book which, as a piece of art divorced from worth of content, stands with Caponsacchi's and above the Pope's. For sheer creative strength it may be the most astonishing of the twelve.

Two high ecclesiastics are visiting Guido in prison: Guido says he must talk, and they are there to listen.

*You have my last word,—innocent am I  
As Innocent my Pope and murderer,  
Innocent as a babe, as Mary's own.  
As Mary's self . . .*

But that said, it is put away: innocent or guilty, he demands to live. He bursts into a fire of eloquence at thought of the life that is in him and is to be lost:

*Life!*

*How I could spill this overplus of mine  
 Among those hoar-haired, shrunk-shanked odds and ends  
 Of body and soul old age is chewing dry! . . .  
 Is it not terrible, I entreat you, Sirs?—  
 Such manifold and plenitudinous life . . .  
 Terrible so to be alive—yet die?*

But crime comes to execution, and he rattles on with nervous facetiousness about the guillotine and its circumstances. But why must it be?—if the Pope were only good and merciful! 'Christ's maxim is—one soul outweighs the world.' He enters on a bitter indictment of the Church and the myth of its protecting wings—he a member, 'a shuddering sheep now called a wolf'.

He turns next upon the law, declaring that there is nothing moral or sacred about it, especially now that the idea that it embodies God's precepts is as dead as the miraculous power of relics. His indictment becomes personal.

*But you, Sirs, you—  
 Who never budged from litter where I lay,  
 And buried snout i' the draff-box while I fed,  
 Cried amen to my creed's one article—  
 'Get pleasure, 'scape pain . . .  
 And,—inasmuch as faith gains most,—feign faith!  
 So did we brother-like pass word about:  
 —You now,—like bloody drunkards but half-drunk . . .  
 O' the sudden you must needs re-introduce  
 Solemnity, must sober undue mirth  
 By a blow dealt your boon companion here . . .  
 Making me Rome's example.*

Then he realizes that attack, though satisfying, wins no favour, so he launches out on a whining defence. If he went wrong over Pompilia and the Comparini pair, he was blinded by jealousy. He goes at great length into his relations with Pompilia, growing ever more loathsome, though the verse is full of fire and force:

how should I use my wife,  
Love her or hate her? . . .  
The thirteen-years'-old child, with milk for blood . . .  
She eyes me with those frightened balls of black,  
As heifer—the old simile comes pat—  
Eyes tremblingly the altar and the priest.

He grows furious at the remembrance that she shrank from his middle-aged touch. He resents her very obedience. 'What you call my wife, I call a nullity in human shape'. Her long-suffering is the worst offence of all—like 'the terrible patience of God'. He demands to know why she could not acknowledge at least man's superiority in brawny arm and fist, and comes out with hideous frankness:

*But why particularize, defend the deed?  
Say that I hated her for no one cause  
Beyond my pleasure so to do,—what then?  
... as God's my judge  
I see not where the fault lies!*

He is maddened by his inability to have proved Caponsacchi and Pompilia guilty, and complains bitterly of Pompilia not dying under his stabbings—'this one ghost-thing half on earth half out of it', who forgives him but brings him to his death.

Just as Satan was boasting in triumph a moment before he found himself on his belly in the dust, so Guido rises to his climax of devilish pride just before the end:

*The time's arrived when, ancient Roman-like,  
I am bound to fall on my own sword—why not  
Say—Tuscan-like, more ancient, better still?  
Will you hear truth can do no harm, nor good?  
I think I never was at any time  
A Christian, as you nickname all the world,  
Me among others: truce to nonsense now!  
Name me, a primitive religionist—  
As should the aboriginal be  
I boast myself, Etruscan, Aretine,  
One sprung,—your frigid Virgil's fieriest word,—*

*From fauns and nymphs, trunks and the heart of oak,  
 With,—for a visible divinity,—  
 The portent of a Jove Ægiocnus  
 Descried 'mid clouds, lightning and thunder, couched  
 On topmost crag of your Capitoline—  
 'Tis in the seventh Æneid,—what, the Eighth?  
 Right,—thanks, Abate,—though the Christian's dumb,  
 The Latinist's vivacious in you yet!*

He almost looks forward to death, with the possibility of returning as a wolf! There must be some use somewhere 'for a mood like mine, implacable, persistent in revenge'. He grows more defiant, and arrogantly offers bribes and threats—suggests he can help the Cardinal to the Papacy, and make even the Pope suffer if he will not relent.

At last the fateful silence of the two ecclesiastics tells on him. Despair comes into his voice, but he recovers and snaps round like a trapped and ferocious animal: the Pope is dying, the Abate's cough and crimson blotch bespeak his death, the Cardinal's deserted bride is dead and his ambition fruitless. Almost foaming he shouts that there is something changeless in his heart, 'some nucleus that's myself'—an unrelenting hate for Pompilia, Pietro and Violante. And as he makes his final frantic boast—

*I have lived and died a man, and take man's chance,  
 Honest and bold: right will be done to such*

—he hears the tread of 'the frightful Brotherhood of Death', and cringes in abject terror:

*Who are these you have let descend my stair? . . .  
 Sirs, have I spoken one word all this while  
 Out of the world of words I had to say?  
 Not one word! All was folly—I laughed and mocked!  
 Sirs, my first true word, all truth and no lie,  
 Is—save me notwithstanding! Life is all!  
 I was just stark mad,—let the madman live  
 Pressed by as many chains as you please pile!  
 Don't open! Hold me from them! I am yours,  
 I am the Granduke's—no, I am the Pope's!  
 Abate,—Cardinal,—Christ,—Maria,—God,—  
 Pompilia, will you let them murder me?*

No words are necessary to emphasize the consummate art of those two final lines. Guido's last scene brings to mind the more protracted agony of Faustus, but whereas there the end was accompanied by an infinite pity—'Cut is the branch that might have grown full straight'—Guido's fate arouses nothing but satisfaction. This is what Aristotle warned the tragic dramatist about, but Guido is no tragic hero, but the unspeakable villain of an appalling life-history.

We cannot but wonder that Browning, a good man, capable of loving Elizabeth and creating Pompilia and Caponsacchi, should equally have understood the nature of absolute evil. It is easier for us to-day: we have seen a recrudescence, in certain limited areas, of an inhuman wickedness and cruelty we thought had been purified away by the anti-septic of civilization, and a Sartre might have provided an even more frightful picture of 'Guido Franceschini, his life and death'. But in the middle of the nineteenth century evil seemed to have been smothered by respectability, and it is no small tribute to the Victorian imagination that it could bring utter depravity to life and show it unable to stand up to its own punishment.

The story was finished: some sort of comment seemed called for, but Browning's interest and capacity were exhausted. Book XII is short and poor. It tells us, in execrable verse, that Guido was in fact executed (a letter from the Yellow Book is being versified):

- *So that all five to-day, have suffered death*  
*With no distinction save in dying,—he,*  
*Decollated by way of privilege,*  
*The rest hanged decently and in order. Thus*  
*Came the Count to his end of gallant man,*  
*Defunct in faith and exemplarity.*

Follows some satire on the Church, and a challenge to posterity: the poet declares he has 'blown the spark to flame'—

- *It lives,*  
*If precious be the soul of man to man.*

It lives yet, and will continue to live, but not as a work of art. Work of art it forcibly is, yet without the look of immortality. It is too long (though Browning called it 'the shortest poem I ever wrote, for the

stuff there is in it'). It has not been shaped, though it was ingested over years. Milton told his two tremendous stories—the revolt of the angels and the consequent fall of man—in 10,000 lines, every one of which has its carefully calculated place. Browning used 20,000 to tell his slighter single story, and it is literally true that a greater artist would have made half the number do. It is not only that six of the books could be dispensed with altogether (or reduced to meagre summaries), but that of the other six all except Pompilia's (and perhaps Guido's second) would profit by pruning. Nevertheless *The Ring and the Book* is a great and wonderful poem, partly because it does, as its author says, lay bare three souls and the mind of a fourth, but even more, I think, because it is a monument to Browning's enormous zest for life. For all the perfection of their art, *Paradise Lost* and *The Faerie Queene* and *Idylls of the King* are spirit-pale beside the pulsating full-blooded undisciplined life of *The Ring and the Book*. Even the *Aeneid* is ascetic by comparison. Only in the two Greek epics (I cannot speak with adequate knowledge of Dante) will you find an equal zest for life, expressed with a serener art.

The moral content of the poem is massive. Mr Stephen Spender has said it is difficult to read it and continue to think Browning an optimist. But this is to ignore the fact that evil, after a terrible but temporary triumph, was (like Nazi Germany) challenged and brought low. The mere existence of wickedness is less important than what happens to it: pessimism is the proper reaction to modern fiction, where it so often seems to be accepted that the natural concomitant of evil-doing is success and satisfaction. The action of poetic justice is plainer in *The Ring and the Book* than in the *Idylls*: death comes to Arthur through Modred, fruit of his infidelity (and the moral link is more explicit in Malory than in Tennyson), but it comes rather as Greek fate than as Christian justice. In any case, it is not what happens to the characters that makes us call their creators optimists or pessimists, but what they are. When Julia Wedgwood had read the first half of *The Ring and the Book* she complained that goodness was over-weighted by evil, especially by Guido, who, having no spark of goodness, seemed to her not to belong to 'God's world' at all: Browning replied that though he was specially interested in 'morbid cases of the soul' the poem did, he contended, show an actual preponderance of good; as for the credibility of Guido, he put forward the unusual but arguable opinion that Napoleon I was just such another monster.

Mr Richard Church calls the poem 'an agonized enquiry into human



conduct'. Not agonized, I think, since Browning had made up his mind from the first where the guilt lay. If the evil in Guido had been less unqualified he could have been allowed to make out a case which might have aroused some doubt, some tentative sympathy: as it is his arguments are all obvious special pleading, so false as to require no answer and showing him ever blacker of heart. Nevertheless the general effect of the poem is one of elevation, and this not only by reason of the shining presence of the three beautiful characters. There is, in addition, as Browning himself said, an unintermittent protest on his part—indirect but all the more effective—against the evil and in favour of the good. 'It is Virginia Woolf's particular philosophy to show that goodness in itself is what matters, but that it cannot alter human destiny.'<sup>1</sup> Pompilia's goodness mattered indeed, but is it true to say that it could not alter human destiny? It could not save her life, but it made a great difference to Caponsacchi's destiny, and its light, brilliantly amplified by Browning, must have thrown a radiance upon the dreams and aspirations of many who have read her story.

And *The Ring and the Book* is, after all, Pompilia's ring and Pompilia's book. It could not have been so—the Italian story would not have been seized upon by Browning—if she had died like Pietro and Violante. But the miracle did happen. She did survive to see her baby safe, to bring Guido to justice and to forgive him, to make a brief deposition and confession which provided Browning with inspiration for the great poem he wrote under her name. Browning the feminist produced the only epic with a woman for its lonely and courageous 'hero': splendid as Caponsacchi is he is only so by reason of his relation to Pompilia. In the *Idylls* Tennyson even has two heroes, with Guinevere emphatically secondary to both. Julia Wedgwood, complimenting Browning on his wonderful revelation of the woman's side, cannot forgive him for 'planting his lovely snowdrop on a dunghill'. But of course this was history's doing, not Browning's. She threatened to edit the poem, keeping only enough of Guido and the lawyers 'to make an ebony frame for the pearly image of Pompilia'; and one may agree that the idea of a 'shorter *Ring and the Book*' is attractive.<sup>2</sup> Mrs Orr was convinced that Elizabeth's 'spiritual presence entered into the conception of Pompilia', but I have indicated a very severely modified agreement with this view. When Mrs Orr suggests that 'the ingenuously un-

<sup>1</sup> Winifred Holtby in *Virginia Woolf*.

<sup>2</sup> I have already suggested this, but the idea is critically frowned upon—called 'disembowelling'

bounded maternal pride, the almost luscious maternal sentiment of Pompilia's dying moments, can only associate themselves in our mind with Mrs Browning's personal utterances'—one is constrained to surmise that perhaps Mrs Orr did not altogether approve of Elizabeth.

When Henry James said that he saw a novel in *The Ring and the Book* he meant a conventional novel, with Caponsacchi for hero, and in prose. But *The Ring and the Book* in 100,000 words of prose would have been intolerable. It would have made an Elizabethan tragedy of blood: Tourneur might have handled it. But the effort to recast the substance of the poem, for either a novel or a play only serves to emphasize Browning's individuality of treatment. There is no epical 'action'; or rather the action is got over in Book I. The poem consists essentially of a series of psychological studies, studies of a 'triangle' of people and a Pope. It is not even the story of a trial, though the character-studies are arranged in a way to lead up to the climax of a death sentence. I do not think it can be called a psychological epic. The psychological epic is *The Prelude*, which has an epical action in the unfolding life of a poet, done in such a way that the mind of the poet is shown unfolding at the same time. *The Ring and the Book* is indeed anomalous. Yet it is psychologically creative in a way for which there is no parallel outside *Hamlet* and *King Lear*. Browning took, as he said, a fragment of soil: it was not, as he suggested, part of God's world, but from the floor of hell. Yet from it he caused to arise, by supreme imaginative power, not the two trees of the Garden of Eden but four—two immortally beautiful trees of life, and the tree of good and evil separated into two more, a tree of good and a tree of evil.

I do not think *The Ring and the Book*, any more than *Idylls of the King*, takes first place among its author's works, but contemporary opinion felt otherwise. The *Athenæum* called it 'the *opus magnum* of this generation, the supreme poetic achievement of the age, the most precious and profound spiritual treasure that England has produced since Shakespeare'.

## 2

Browning was a born story-teller, and he gloried in a long swinging narrative which would hold together without the elaborate architecture that sustained *The Ring and the Book*. If he had not thought so much of his versifying talent he might have been a prose novelist: in fact to-day, when no writer is content to write in one kind, he would probably have

been a novelist as well as a poet. But he had no great gifts in prose style, and I think we can regret his abstention from the novel form only in the case of *Sordello*. The present section, which is to deal with the longer narrative poems, will not include *Sordello*, which is more attractive for its philosophical implications than for its story interest; this is not quite true of *Paracelsus*, but that poem also will be considered in the chapter on Browning's philosophy. This leaves us with *Balaustion's Adventure* and *Aristophanes' Apology*, *Red Cotton Night-cap Country*, *The Inn Album*, and *The Two Poets of Croisic*; with some shorter though still longish narratives—*The Flight of the Duchess*, *The Statue and the Bust*, *In a Balcony* and *A Forgiveness*.

It appears that we owe *Balaustion's Adventure* to three women. In the course of her observations on *The Ring and the Book* Julia Wedgwood said, 'Oh yes, dear Friend, do give us something purely from yourself. Give [your wife] a monument more durable than that at Florence.' She went on to hope that it might be something that all who read would recognize as the utterance of one who had been taught supremely to believe in goodness by the close neighbourhood of a beautiful soul; and Browning agreed that his next effort might be in this direction. Two years later came *Balaustion's Adventure*, which may, I think, be regarded as a fulfilment, and a handsome fulfilment, of the promise. But the immediate instigator seems to have been the Countess Cowper, who, says Browning in his dedication, 'imposed on me as a task, what has proved the most delightful of May-month amusements' (and there is surely something interesting in this second collocation of the word 'task' with the name 'Cowper'). Finally there is Elizabeth herself, whose love for Euripides supplied the spirit of the poem as well as its prelude stanza, together with a charming reference in the text.

But Browning here carried out a second promise. He had said that before he died he hoped 'to purely invent' something, and *Balaustion's Adventure* comes nearer to pure invention than most of his narrative poems. It is indeed pedestalled on the historic fact of the defection of Rhodes after the Athenian disaster at Syracuse, but out of this Browning causes to arise the story of a girl who shamed a few of the islanders into remaining faithful to the mother-city:

*Never throw Athens off for Sparta's sake—  
Never disloyal to the life and light  
Of the whole world worth calling world at all!*

It is true also that the main issue in the 'adventure' which follows on her patriotic call is a recital of a play by Euripides, but to speak of this as a 'translation' is to misrepresent the fact. Browning uses the less clearly defined term 'transcript', and there is a wide difference between a play seen and described and a plain translation of the text. Browning's handling of the *Alcestis* is as brilliantly original and dramatic as anything he ever did. And as with other recastings, he dared even to give the classical play a new tail—side by side with the old one.

Balaustion, the 'wild-pomegranate flower' (perhaps a recollection of Elizabeth's early attribution to Browning of the veined and blood-tinctured heart) begins her tale—of how she came to recite the *Alcestis*—with charming naturalness:

*About that strangest, saddest, sweetest song  
I, when a girl, heard in Kameiros once,  
And, after, saved my life by? Oh, so glad  
To tell you the adventure!*

The narrative that follows is admirably straightforward, sparse and vivid, bare yet beautiful, with the naked grace of a Greek athlete. Unlike most of the other long narratives it avoids all unnecessary detail. Only once does it fall into one of Browning's endless breathless sentences, and this is redeemed immediately by the lovely speech of the Captain recommending to the hostile Syracusans the 'lyric girl' who quotes Euripides all day long, now 'some whole passion of a play',

*Now peradventure but a honey-drop  
That slept its comb i' the chorus.*

We get the whole sense of culture, of civilization, when she tells us that 'then, because Greeks are Greeks and hearts are hearts and poetry is power', the Syracusan leader promised that if she would recite a play she and her company would be sent safely on their way to Athens.

So we come to the transcript of the *Alcestis* of Euripides, given by Balaustion from the steps of the temple of Heracles to the listening populace of Syracuse. She is describing, with the utmost picturesqueness, a performance of the play,<sup>1</sup> and Browning anticipates objections

<sup>1</sup> Browning must have seen a performance of the play, perhaps at Oxford or Cambridge, though I find no reference to his having done so

likely to be made by scholars. He makes the girl quote a 'brisk little somebody, critic and whipper-snapper', who protested that she could not have seen, as she seems to suggest, the emotional workings of the actors' faces under their masks. Balaustion replies that this is the power of poetry, and leaves it at that.

The descriptive method is particularly effective with stage directions. Instead of 'Before the Palace of Admetus. Enter Apollo', we get Balaustion's beautifully phrased opening, full of dreaming memory:

*There slept a silent palace in the sun,  
With plains adjacent and Thessalian peace--  
Phera, where King Admetos ruled the land.  
Out from the portico there gleamed a God,  
Apollon: for the bow was in his hand,  
The quiver at his shoulder, all his shape  
One dreadful beauty. And he hailed the house  
As if he knew it well and loved it much.*

Presently, when Death enters,

*. . . we observed another Deity,  
Half in, half out the portal . . .  
Like some dread heapy blackness, ruffled wing,  
Convulsed and covering head that is all eye,  
. . . Which proves a ruined eagle . . .*

confronted by

*. . . the great lion-guardian of the gorge,  
Lord of the ground, a stationed glory there.*

For 'enter Chorus', Balaustion gives us a personal impression:

*. . . in came stealing slow, now this, now that  
Old sojourner throughout the country-side,  
Servants grown friends to those unhappy here.*

To suit the conception of a memorized version of something heard rather than something read, Browning gives the lyrical utterances of

the chorus partly in summary partly in full translation but in lyrical blank verse, not in stanzas.

The method enables Balaustion, on the entry of the Queen, to give her own thoughts on the effect on Alcestis of the knowledge that she was about to die. She notes that Alcestis spoke no word of love for her husband, feeling that what he had gained she had paid for with 'all that coin' with which she might have made so many others happy—'she saw things plain as Gods do'. So too, after Admetus's sorrowful speech to Alcestis, Balaustion observes that he had long ago accepted, 'with eyes wide open', his wife's offer to die for him, and though his sobs are 'no wise insincere' he does not offer to forgo her sacrifice. At the entry of Heracles (for whom Browning shows admiration and love, evidently conceiving him as a personage after his own heart, rather as James Stephens did Pan):

. . . *A great voice—*  
*'My hosts here!'*  
*Oh, the thrill that ran through us!*  
*Never was aught so good and opportune*  
*As that great interrupting voice . . . Herakles was here . . .*  
*. . . the weary happy face of him,—half-God,*  
*Half-man, which made the god-part God the more.*

(I suppose this is a reference to Browning's views on the Incarnation.)

Balaustion continues to play a commentator's part. At one point she wishes the chorus were less impersonal, more critical, in their attitude to Admetus:

*I would the Chorus here had plucked up heart,*  
*Spoken out boldly and explained the man,*  
*If not to men, to Gods;*

this failing, she herself suggests that Admetus has inherited his father's selfish nature, though without the old man's 'fintiness'—'only half-selfish now, since sensitive'. After a finely imaginative visualization of the 'sad procession' pacing after 'that symmetric step of Death', we are given a long interpolation by Balaustion, that is by Browning, by way of commentary on the words of a 'certain ancient servitor'. It provides a flash-back of Admetus 'going his rounds, poor soul',

*A-begging somebody to be so brave  
As die for one afraid to die himself;*

and asks the woman's question, how could the King bear to live through the sacrifice of his wife; after which we are brought back to Heracles, 'the mighty presence, all one smile, and no touch more of the world-weary God', ready to save Alcestis as an interlude amid his labours. When he has departed on his errand—leaving 'dull fact' behind him—the funeral procession returns and Admetus broods on 'the impossible mad life' that is left him—with an 'infinite grief' and a change of heart not recognizable in the Greek.

Once again, instead of 'Enter Heracles' we have from Balaustion a superb description of the hero returned from his contest with Death:

*Happy, as always; something grave, perhaps;  
The great vein-cordage on the fret-worked front  
Black-swollen, beaded yet with battle-dew,*

'all Heracles was back again', bearing Alcestis. When Admetus at length realizes what has happened, in place of the colourless dialogue of the text Balaustion says,

*Ah, but the tears come, find the words at fault!  
There is no telling how the hero twitched  
The veil off: and there stood, with such fixed eyes  
And such slow smile, Alkestis' silent self!  
It was the crowning grace of that great heart,  
To keep back joy, procrastinate the truth  
Until the wife, who had made proof and found  
The husband wanting, might essay once more,  
Hear, see, and feel him renovated now—  
Able to do, now, all herself had done,  
Risen to the height of her: so, hand in hand,  
The two might go together, live and die.*

(There are thoughts and words here that strongly recall *Any Wife to Any Husband*, and the lost Alcestis must have appealed to him who had lost Elizabeth.)

It is a softened picture of the fate-ridden Greek view of life. But we

have not finished. Browning has already allowed Balaustion to throw a light of feminine feeling and tendency over the play—thoroughly masculine as it came from even the ‘human’ Euripides—and now, by a final inspiration (‘tasteless’ to the classical scholar), he makes her suggest a new *Alcestis*. Morris had already done something towards this: he, like Browning, could not believe that Admetus was the thing the Greek myth makes him, and in *The Love of Alcestis* Morris shows the King quietly putting aside the thought of anyone at all dying in his place, so that though his wife dies for him she does so not resentfully but with joy. Browning, through the Greek girl, goes further. In Balaustion’s new version, given only in summary, Alcestis declares she will die for her husband, Admetus refuses to accept the sacrifice, Alcestis insists and cries, like Eurydice, ‘Look at me once!’:

*Therewith her whole soul entered into his,  
He looked the look back, and Alkestis died.*

But in Hades Proserpine sees through the fraud—‘You are not dead—you have left your soul behind with your husband—return to it!’—and before the King realizes what has happened she is alive again and he in raptures.

If ‘the sense of good had seemed dimmed’ by *The Ring and the Book*, Browning had indeed atoned with a story of incomparable beauty, love and goodness, its ‘moral’ that woman is creative, the civilizer, indispensable to man. He had felt it as early as *Pauline*; his twin tentative heroes, Paracelsus and Sordello, failed because they undervalued woman; *Pippa* showed the celestial influence of the mere passing presence, the mere echo, of innocent girlhood; and the lyrics reinforced the truth. In *The Ring and the Book* the star still shone, but fitfully amid massed clouds of evil: as between man and woman a balance was held—Pompilia inspired Caponsacchi, Caponsacchi saved Pompilia, but both were lost. In the loveliness of Balaustion and the devotion of Alcestis the spirit by which Browning lived became once more dominant, and the poem stands beside *Pippa Passes* as a triumph of joyous art, and the more joyous for being written in a month. Published at the age of fifty-nine, it was Browning’s last substantial work of genius.<sup>1</sup>

*Balaustion* has a sequel, and it has also a Prologue, which appears

<sup>1</sup> Surprisingly, Mr Osbert Burdett, whose book, *The Brownings*, is crammed with good things, says nothing at all about this poem.



actually at the beginning of the *Parleyings*, sixteen years later. It is called *Apollo and the Fates*, and tells the story of the friendly god's mission to Hades, before the play begins, on behalf of the dying Admetus. It is a brilliant and humorous piece of work, in a stanza-form admirably adapted to the purpose of the colloquy, with all four supernatural persons well individualized.

Apollo asks for an extension of Admetus's life, but the Fates refuse on the ground that man's life is so unpleasant that the sooner it is over the better. Apollo informs them that man has found out wine as a compensation for the ills of life, and to prove his point plies the Three Sisters with drink until they admit that life is not so bad after all. Zeus sends a warning in the form of a thunderbolt, which partly sobers them, but they are still ripe enough to agree to grant Admetus life if someone can be found to die in his place. Apollo says there will be no difficulty about this—all the King's subjects will rush to die for him, but his father will be first: to which Clotho says *Bah!* Well then, says Apollo, his mother or his wife—and Lachesis assents with a *Tra-la-la!* But of course, says Apollo, Admetus will 'spurn the exchange—rather die' and Atropos utters a scornful, *Ha, ha, ha!*

I am unable to take this poem as seriously as de Vane: he says it 'arose out of thoughts occasioned by the death of Milsand', and suggests that the 'wine' represents life viewed with imagination. However, there is no denying that the little piece is highly successful, with an impressiveness increased by the skilful use of dactylic-trochaic verse.

So much cannot be said for the 'sequel'—*Aristophanes' Apology*, written four years after the first *Adventure*. This contains another 'transcript from Euripides', but this time in the form of a straight translation, of the *Heracles*. It is neatly introduced into the action, but there is too much of the action, or rather of the oratory that occupies most of the poem. The first 'adventure' was cut to exactly the right length; this 'last' one bulks more than twice as large, and is completely undisciplined. The 'Apology' for the comedian's art, the 'meaner muse', involves the usual arguments that comedy is closer to life than tragedy, provides the only free criticism of society, and takes a realistically 'low' view instead of an abstractly high one. Aristophanes makes the interesting suggestion that a dramatist combining high and low, Tragedy and Comedy, may one day make his appearance—perhaps in the 'tin-islands', which, meaning the Scillies, obviously indicates England. But it was as easy for Browning to arm his Greek playwright with

foreknowledge as it was for Gray to give second-sight to his Welsh Bard.

Readers who wish to see Comedy more subtly defended will turn to Meredith's *Comic Spirit*, and indeed it is unlikely that anyone will ever again read *Aristophanes' Apology*, so it is unnecessary to speak further about it. The personal history of Balaustion and her young husband Euthucles is carried on with skill and charm, and the girl maintains her forceful and delightful personality as far as the passive learning of the poem permits.

Reading the long narrative poems that followed *Balaustion* is rather like mining for gold in a field of low deposit: the labour involved is immense, but the results of perseverance are considerable and there are infrequent 'finds' sufficiently good to be exciting. *Red Cotton Night-cap Country* is in form an occasional poem. It was written for Anne Thackeray, and the personal flavouring is natural and attractive. It tells a story they had heard and enjoyed together, with familiar references to people and places. The story itself has elements of the dreadful, and raises doubts as to whether it was worth telling at this length, but it appealed at once to Browning as 'such a subject' for a poem, and on the whole I think he makes out a case. There is much interest of character: the man's half-animal half-mystic sense of religion, *outré* and uncontrolled (a Browning invention), and the woman's quiet goodness, are painted in with skill and deliberation; otherwise the story is told just as it was gathered from the local Press—with, as usual, an original addition in the form of an explanation of the apparent suicide that ended the story. The 'red' motif of violence and blood is gradually introduced into this country of white cotton night-caps; the recurrence of the symbols of the 'tower' for high thinking and the 'turf' for low living is irritating rather than satisfying, and the early part suffers from a quite unnecessary facetiousness of style. With a few lapses, the verse is in Browning's best conversational manner, its tone set by the charming opening:

*And so, here happily we meet, fair friend! . . .  
 Even as we met where we have met so oft,  
 Now meet we on this unpretending beach  
 Below the little village: little, ay!  
 But pleasant, may my gratitude subjoin?  
 Meek, hitherto un-Murrayed bathing-place,  
 Best loved of sea-coast-nook-ful Normandy!*

The poem rambles on, but gradually we begin to disentangle a theme: he is describing a château, Clairvaux, and a man named Léonce Miranda who lived there with his wife. He is now dead, but he was devout and charitable, and his wife so pious that she seemed hardly of this world. Then suddenly,

*Do you know  
I saw her yesterday—set eyes upon  
The veritable personage, no dream?*

There follows a masterly account of her appearance, with a meditation on her 'face of wax' and the kind of man who would desire it: a face blank to the casual observer but taking impressment from the warmth of one 'who had seen her soul reflected there'. The lady, he says, was emerging from a gate, attended by a black-garbed maid and 'two giant goats and two prodigious sheep pure as the arctic fox'. The effect was quite in accordance with Miss Thackeray's 'white-cotton night-caps'—but, says Browning, wait till I tell you their story and explain why I have insisted that the caps should be red.

The promise is carried out in Parts II and III, which might well have been abbreviated into one. Browning's mind is too abundant to tell a plain tale, and the opening is almost as tantalizing as the more famous opening of *Sordello*:

*Monsieur Léonce Miranda, then, . . . but stay!  
Permit me a preliminary word,*

the word extending to 120 lines on the ethics of restoration, after which we resume:

*The son and heir, then, of the jeweller,  
Monsieur Léonce Miranda . . .*

The poem goes on to chronicle Miranda's early manhood, with his childish and unshakeable faith, his cynical view of love and women, and his five mistresses whom he deceived into believing he was poor. Then he meets Clara Millefleurs, and is, from now till death, faithful to her with true love. Clara is a passive and enigmatic figure. Though the poem may have arisen from Browning's accidental glimpse of her, he

makes no attempt to plumb her depths. He calls her a polyanthus—no simple primrose but a cultivated flower, a woman of much experience: a married woman, separated from her husband, and kept till recently by a man who has now deserted her.

At this point Browning passes from facetiousness to sympathy:

*Frail shadow of a woman in the flesh  
These very eyes of mine saw yesterday,  
Would I re-tell this story of your woes,  
Would I have heart to do you detriment . . .*

She was happy for twenty years with Miranda, and though Browning, the Victorian, is uneasy at their not being legally married,

*He must have loved you; that's a pleasant life,  
Whatever was your right to lead the same*

--he defends the couple in a pretty figure:

*The white domestic pigeon pairs secure,  
Nay, does mere duty by bestowing egg  
In authorized compartment, warm and safe,  
Boarding about, and gilded spire above,  
Hoisted on pole, to dogs' and cats' despair!  
But I have spied a veriest trap of twigs  
On tree-top, every straw a thievery,  
Where the wild dove—despite the fowler's snare,  
The sportsman's shot, the urchin's stone,—crooned gay,  
And solely gave her heart to what she hatched,  
Nor minded a malignant world below.*

They live together with the consent of Miranda's mother—their life a mere tent on the turf, according to the symbolism, yet 'soul merged in soul'. The tone grows more serious: under his mother's reproofs—not so much for 'living in sin' as for wasting money on the addition of a high tower, a Belvedere, to Clairvaux—Miranda grows depressed and makes an unsuccessful attempt to drown himself. Sent for again, he finds his mother dead, and now for a time his mind gives way. At first he declares he will give up not only Clara but his share in the jewellery

business; then he reads Clara's letters and, lest he should be tempted to return to her, cries 'burn and purify', and plunges not only the letters but his hands into the fire. This ghastly incident has been preceded by certain dramatic hints—he has felt 'worn to rags, nay, tinder', and has told Clara 'I shall refuse no fuel that may blaze'; one of the family, 'warming his own hands by the fire', hopes Clara will not come for a 'parting touch of hand'.

*Something had happened quite contrariwise.  
Monsieur Léonce Miranda, one by one,  
Had read the letters and the love they held,  
And, that task finished, had required his soul  
To answer frankly what the prospect seemed  
Of his own love's departure—pledged to part!  
Then, answer being unmistakable,  
He had replaced the letters quietly,  
Shut coffer, and so, grasping either side  
By its convenient handle, plunged the whole—  
Letters and coffer and both hands to boot,  
Into the burning grate and held them there.  
'Burn, burn, and purify my past!' said he,  
Calmly, as if he felt no pain at all.*

His hands are completely burnt off, but during the three months' illness that follows he recovers his sanity, and as soon as he can walk he goes quietly back to Clara, asseverating 'constancy henceforth till life shall end'.

Browning offers an explanation of how Miranda's mind has worked. It was not just a return to 'sin'.

*The man had simply made discovery . . .  
That what was, was: --that turf, his feet had touched,  
Felt solid just as much as yonder towers  
He saw with eyes, but did not stand upon . . .  
People had told him flowery turf was false  
To footstep, tired the traveller soon, beside:  
That was untrue. They told him, 'One fair stride  
Plants on safe platform and secures man rest'.  
That was untrue.*

Religion and human love are both necessary to life:

*Don't tell me that my earthly love was sham,  
My heavenly fear a clever counterfeit!  
Each may oppose each, yet be true alike.*

The idea now was to connect 'turf' and 'tower' by a tunnel—reconcile love and duty: and this was to be done by revoking worldly wealth.

There follows a passage of quite special interest. Browning has a unique way of bringing his friends—Leighton, Domett, Elizabeth—plainly and sometimes by name into his verse: here it is his life-long friend, the French critic, Milsand. He tells us that if you stand on the Tower of Clairvaux you will see in one direction Saint Rambert, where Milsand lived, and in another the shrine of the Virgin of La Ravissante, and he wishes Miranda might have gone to Milsand for help instead of to the Virgin. Milsand, 'a man of men', one who knows more and loves better than 'the world that never heard his name', would, after five minutes' talk, understand both the good and the ignorance that were in Miranda and

*. . . just as he would pityingly teach  
Your body to repair maltreatment, give  
Advice that you should make those stumps to stir  
With artificial hands of caoutchouc,  
So would he soon supply your crippled soul  
With crutches, from his own intelligence,  
Able to help you onward in the path  
Of rectitude whereto your face is set . . .*

If you would do justice to yourself, to her who is 'very like a wife, or something better', to the world, and to God—'Go and consult his voice', the voice of:

*Milsand, who makest warm my wintry world  
And wise my heaven, if there we consort too.  
Monsieur Léonce Miranda turned, alas,  
Or was turned, by no angel, t'other way,  
And got him guidance of The Ravissante.*

Miranda goes to the Priest and Nun in charge of the Virgin's shrine and asks whether he must relinquish his life with Clara. By the rule of their Church they should have decreed separation: all that happened was that Miranda made gifts to the shrine and the poor and continued to live with Clara. And after two more years climbs the Tower one day while waiting for his horse to be saddled.

So far the local story. All that was known after this was that Miranda was found dead at the foot of the Tower, but Browning devotes a fourth part (beginning it prettily—'Ready to hear the rest? How good you are!') to an original interpretation of what may have happened. After a powerful description of the wide view visible from the top of the Belvedere (of which Miranda saw nothing, but turned towards 'steeple, church and shrine, The Ravissante') Browning says,

*He thought . . .*

*(Suppose I should prefer 'He said?'*

*Along with every act—and speech is act—*

*There go, a multitude impalpable*

*To ordinary human faculty,*

*The thoughts which give the act significance.)*

*He said, then, probably no word at all,*

*But thought as follows—in a minute's space—*

*One particle of ore beats out such leaf!*

Miranda tells the Virgin he has always worshipped her, but has felt an equal love for Clara, a love which he knows is 'Lust of the flesh, lust of the eye, life's pride'. Still, he has done much for the Virgin—burnt off his hands, given away his money, without visible reward. His reward from Clara was plain, and if the Virgin called it swine's food—'Husks keep flesh from starvation anyhow!' He asks for a sign, 'One shoot through heart and brain, assurance bright and brief'. It comes in the form of an inspired thought. The Virgin had caused angels to carry her image back to where it had been found: will she not increase his faith by carrying him, Miranda, from Clairvaux to her shrine at La Ravissante? Even angels are not necessary—'only suspend the law of gravity!' This will not only restore his own faith, but will multiply faith in all who hear of it, Emperor and all. A last passionate idea strikes him: out of this I shall surely gain—not (as we have perhaps expected) strength to

put aside the rival love, but a Clara made clean of her past, so that he can marry her. The Ravissante smiles.

*'And will you bless 'us both?  
And may I worship you, and yet lovè her?  
Then'—*

*A sublime spring from the balustrade  
About the tower so often talked about,  
A flash in middle air, and stone-dead lay  
Monsieur Léonce Miranda on the turf.*

Now all this mind-working is pure supposition, but it has an inner necessity: it rises out of Browning's special gift of reading souls, and it makes the unpleasant story worth while. Some explanation of the fall is required— if it was not an accident, a motive must have been there. Browning puts himself inside Miranda's mind, with sympathy and love, and finds this. If we believe in Browning we shall accept it. This addition to the local legend is even better than Balaustion's new ending to the *Alceste*—it is less playful, more intensely imagined.

The poem concludes with some reflections on Clara. She too is able to enter into the mind of her dead lover:

*O my child,  
My truant, little boy, despite thy beard .  
You wanted, did you, to enjoy a flight?*

He should have come and told her about it; then the fall would have been but on to her knees, and he would have been none the worse 'for journey to your Ravissante and back'. Browning has no high opinion of Clara: he holds her 'the happier specimen', but only because she was 'complete' in the artistic sense. She was just 'good to Miranda' as a means to life. 'True love works never for the loved one so'—her love was not based on truth. This looks like the notorious Victorian 'one law for the man another for the woman', but he brings her, and the poem, to an end with a lovely passage:

*So, when I grazed the skirts,  
And had the glimpse of who made, yesterday,—  
Woman and retinue of goats and sheep,—*



*The sombre path one whiteness, vision-like,  
As out of gate, and in at gate again,  
They wavered,—shew as lady there for life:  
And, after life—I hope, a white success  
Of some sort, wheresoever life resume  
School interrupted by vacation—death.*

*Red Cotton Night-cap Country* was somewhat underestimated by contemporary opinion, and R. H. Hutton failed to find a single line of poetry in it. I have been more successful than this, but must admit to being repelled by the thick French atmosphere. This, however, is the slightest of barriers compared with the violent Victorianism of the poem that followed two years later, *The Inn Album*. Victorianism did not of course deter the Victorians, and *The Inn Album* was received with rapture. F. J. Furnivall called it 'the most profoundly touching story and the most powerful poem of modern times', while Mrs Orr declared that its expression of the higher sexual love was unsurpassed in Browning's work. As to that, there are love-passages between the Lady (as no names occur in the poem we must speak of the Lady, the Good Young Man, and the Bad Elderly Man) and the B.E.M. which are simply unbearable, on her side a nauseating variety of romantic love felt by a good woman for her cynical seducer, on his a calculated hypocritical profession sounding indecently like truth. The G.Y.M. undoubtedly has one beautiful speech voicing the deep disinterested love already noticed in *The Worst of It* and *Too Late* (and of course better done there). This young man is attractive enough, and would have been more so if he had applied his boot earlier to the B.E.M.—who is a compound of Byron, Iago and the common cad—instead of waiting till it is too late and then throttling him. The story, which has a basis of fact in an old scandal (Browning added the killing of the villain), is so wildly absurd, its happenings, relations and motives so inexplicable and incredible, that to re-tell it would be a waste of time, and indeed it is told in the poem with sufficient clearness, in spite of a number of interminable longeurs. The verse is generally banal, often unnatural, windy and obscure, occasionally rising to beauty, and sometimes sounding extraordinarily like the Player-King in *Hamlet*.

There are redeeming moments. The quotations from the Visitors' Book are amusing, and even more so is the comment on one with a bad rhyme:

*That bard's a Browning; he neglects the form:  
But ah, the sense, ye gods, the weighty sense!*

What a world of irritation with criticism is got off in that quip! The descriptions of the inn parlour:

*On a sprig-pattern-paper, I wall there brays  
Complaint to sky Sir Edwin's dripping stag . . .  
Grim o'er the mirror on the mantelpiece,  
Varnished and confined, Salmo ferox glares  
—Possibly at the List of Wines . . .*

and of the view of 'England's best' from the window, 'absolute peace, the reign of English nature'—these are quite in Browning's best manner. And, as if in deliberate contrast to this, though coming much later in the poem, there is a 'realistic' picture unique in Browning. The Lady is describing her life with the elderly parish-priest she had married:

*'These four years I have died away  
In village-life. The village? Ugliness  
At best and filthiness at worst, inside.  
Outside, sterility—earth sown with salt  
Or what keeps even grass from growing fresh.  
The life? I teach the poor and learn, myself,  
That commonplace to such stupidity  
Is all-recondite. Being brutalized  
Their true need is brute-language, cheery grunts  
And kindly cluckings, no articulate  
Nonsense that's elsewhere knowledge. Tend the sick,  
Sickened myself by pig-perversity,  
Cat-craft, dog-snarling . . .*

The picture is a grim one (and one wonders how Browning got the knowledge of it), but its force is not increased by the arid and gritty style. The general lack of distinction in the verse makes it impossible that *The Inn Album* should be a 'powerful poem', and the attitudes struck by all the figures come so near to the ridiculous that any 'touching' quality the story may have had has long ago evaporated.

In *The Two Poets of Croisic* we have two strictly historical stories told in good Browning fashion with no touch of genius, and without the

usual original additions or modifications, other than some moral comment which will be noted in the proper place. The tales are preceded by a dainty lyric of the epigrammatic kind, and followed by a charming narrative (but unhistorical) poem about a Greek performer on the lyre who was helped by a cricket when one of his strings broke which means, as the last lines tell us, that 'a girl's "Love" comes aptly in' when a poet's singing 'grows gruff' because the 'string that made "Love" sound soft' has snapped, 'never to be heard again'. This sounds personal, but there is no suggestion as to who the 'girl' may have been.

In addition to the poems mentioned, there is that equivocal poem, *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangan*, which though heavily didactic tells the story of the Emperor-President and so may be treated as narrative. It is one of the poems in which Browning went to the trouble of working up full vindications of figures or types he disliked—the Roman ecclesiastic, the spiritualist medium, the 'Caliban' of religion, the lesser Napoleon. The motive may have been generosity, or intellectual curiosity, but it almost necessarily resulted in something resembling a dramatic essay in verse. In the case of *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangan* there was also the duty to Elizabeth. As with spiritualism, so with the Emperor's policy and tactics, Browning felt he owed it both to her wandering spirit and to his conscience that his attitude on these two sources of dissension should be made plainer than was possible when personal susceptibilities had been there to darken counsel.

This, the last of the four apologies, is longer, less interesting, and less imaginative than any of the others. Though not published till 1871 it was probably conceived and perhaps written much earlier as a companion-place to Elizabeth's *Napoleon III in Italy* 1860,<sup>1</sup> a thoroughly Victorian poem aflame with enthusiasm for the superman. In letters of 1870-1 Browning shows his contempt for Napoleon ('I think more savagely of the man now'), but in the person of the fictitious Prince he does him full justice in a two-fold presentation: in the first part we have a defence of his actual career and policy, in the second an exposition of the course he ought to have taken to fit in with Browning's standards. As Blougram talked his soul out to Gigadibs, and Sludge to his unmasker, so the exiled Napoleon, with less verisimilitude, chats with a young woman in a tea-shop in Leicester Square.

<sup>1</sup> In 1872 he wrote to Edith Story: 'I really wrote—that is, conceived—the poem 12 years ago in the Via del Tritoni, as a little hand-breadth of prose . . . which I breathed out into the full-grown bubble in a couple of months this autumn that is gone.'

Like the others, the Prince begins with a concrete image. He points to two blots on a sheet of paper: what can be done with them, he asks. Nothing but—and he joins them with a line. That's my way, he says:

*Make what is absolutely new—I can't,  
 Mar what is made already well enough—  
 I won't: but turn to best account the thing  
 That's half-made—that I can.*

He is a conservator, his mission to keep society stable. He believes the times require no great inspired reformer. 'I find all good there's warrant for in the world as yet.' He thinks that 'of men with power and influence now alive' he has seen this most clearly, and by toleration of various points of view he held the balance straight for twenty years. He prefers (and here he speaks for Browning too) this bad world to a perfect one devoid of 'pity, courage, hope, fear, sorrow, joy'. So, like Atlas, he has borne his cosmic burden with patience, believing that, for all the virtues of democracy, in time of stress 'a solitary great man's worth the world'.

On the whole there is no more 'passion' in the verse of this poem than in the thought, yet when the Prince comes to speak of his purposes in Italy, Browning, remembering that Elizabeth believed in these, lets him rise to poetry:

*Ay, still my fragments wander, music-fraught,  
 Sighs of the soul, mine once, mine now, and mine  
 For ever! Crumbled arch, crushed aqueduct,  
 Alive with tremors in the shaggy growth  
 Of wild-wood, crevice-sown, that triumphs there  
 Imparting exultation to the hills!  
 Sweep of the swathe when only the winds walk  
 And waft my words above the grassy sea  
 Under the blinding blue that basks o'er Rome,—  
 Hear ye not still—'Be Italy again'?*

And when, at the end of this part, he is complaining that his critics saw nothing but inertia in his policy of cautious compromise, and asserting that his 'equable sustainment' required more effort than violent action would have done, he illustrates with a remarkable analogy. He says he

once saw the *Laocoon* so covered as to leave only the figure of *Laocoon* himself visible, whereupon most observers declared it a representation of 'Somnolency': only one—

*I give him leave to write my history—  
Only one said, 'I think the gesture strives  
Against some obstacle we cannot see.'*

Then, to make his criticism constructive, Browning gives the monologue a second start. The Prince says he knows quite well what would have been the righteous course for him, or Napoleon, to follow—but he would have come under no less censure. As 'Head-servant' of his country he should have respected 'the liberty of little minds to blunder on'—maintained democratic institutions. The term of his Presidency expiring, he should have appealed to the people without any *coup d'état*. He would certainly have been given power again, and should have used it to modify the chauvinism of France, teaching her that war was permissible not for *la gloire* but only to stop other powers from violating God's right and truth—as Austria was doing in Italy. He would set Italy free, and ask no Nice and Savoy for his trouble. He would not subscribe to the old reactionary idea that a ruler's son is his natural successor. 'The great gardener grafts the excellence on wildings where he will.' Select your ruler by using your brains: you may blunder, but not so badly as if you rely on 'pillow-luck and divine right'. So the Prince is made to

*map out thus the life I might have led,  
But did not—all the worse for earth and me.*

There is nothing epical or fundamental about this. The criticism is sound but commonplace, the historical estimate reasonably just. The hesitation, indecision and treachery; the inconsistency between the judicious humanity of the Villafranca compromise and the condonation of massacre in 1851<sup>1</sup>—these things are insufficiently noticed in either part. On the other hand, factors in the Emperor's situation which are now seen to excuse some of his worst mistakes could not be adduced—the influence of the Empress and, above all, the weakening of body and mind by agonizing illness. The poem has not virtue enough to sustain

<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth's comments on this had been deplorably casual.

its ponderous bulk, and occupies the lowest place among its author's productions.

## 3

*The Flight of the Duchess* is the earliest of the long-short narratives (it first appeared in the seventh *Bells and Pomegranates*, though it was afterwards put into a later group), and Elizabeth was enthusiastic about it in the *Letters*. For me it is quite spoilt by the welter of double and triple rhymes (Elizabeth called even these 'perfect', but then she erred in the same way herself). This is the first time Browning indulged a weakness which he never afterwards shook off. He had realized what he could do with rhyme three years earlier, in *The Pied Piper*, 'where such juggling is entirely appropriate, and where indeed he seldom goes beyond the double rhyme. In the *Duchess* it is not only that the verbal trickery grates on the teeth, but the story is held up while matter is found to 'fill up the rhyme'. Thus the narrator of the tale has 'made a clean breast' to the Duke, and wants to say, 'And now it is made my mind is easier—or my blood flows more freely': in Browningese we get:

*And now it is made—why, my heart's blood, that went trickle,  
Trickle, but anon, in such muddy dribblets,  
Is pumped up brisk now, through the main ventricle,  
And gemmally floats me about the giblets.*

It is with some difficulty that one realizes that the metre is that of *Christabel*; it is given its chance only in the Gipsy's speech, where, the grotesque rhymes being abandoned, the tone rises astonishingly, and though the verse misses Coleridge's uncanny music, and the 'supernatural' is present only in commonplace form—the Gipsy's charms—yet there is more than a hint:

*'I trace them the vein and the other vein  
That meet on thy brow and part again,  
Making our rapid mystic mark;  
And I bid my people prove and probe  
Each eye's profound and glorious globe  
Till they detect the kindred spark  
In those depths so dear and dark,*

*Like the spots that snap and burst and flee,  
Circling over the midnight sea. . . .  
So, trial after trial past,  
Wilt thou fall at the very last  
Breathless, half in trance  
With the thrill of the great deliverance,  
Into our arms for evermore;  
And thou shalt know, those arms once curled  
About thee, what we knew before,  
How love is the only good in the world:*

(the dropped foot after 'breathless' is effective).

Apart from the parts where rhyme distracts, and the Gipsy's speech where passion prevails, the style is colloquial narrative admirably handled. For the story, this Duchess is not unlike the 'Last' one, with

*the life and gladness  
That over-filled her, as some hive  
Out of the bears' reach in the high trees  
Is crowded with its safe merry bees.*

But this one, instead of allowing her smiles to be 'stopped', defies convention and goes off with the gipsies. The theme of queen-worship, so prominent in these early poems, is present in the person of the Duchess's huntsman, who helps her to escape.

*Then, do you know, her face looked down on me  
With a look that placed a crown on me,  
As she felt in her bosom,—mark, her bosom—  
And, as a flower-tree drops its blossom,  
Dropped me . . . a little plait of hair . . .  
This, see, which at my breast I wear,  
And ever shall, till the Day of Judgment.*

Purged of its too-clever rhymes:

*And to dance on, when we've lost the music,  
Always made me—and no doubt makes you—sick—*

these purged and the story more completely realized by being cut to half its length, *The Flight of the Duchess*<sup>1</sup> might have ranked with *The Bishop Orders his Tomb* and *Hervé Riel*.

*The Statue and the Bust* and *In a Balcony* both first appeared in *Men and Women*, *A Forgiveness* in *Pacchiarotto*. The first of these three is a story with a moral: of the Riccardo's wife and the Duke, who fell in love with each other—she from a window, he from his horse as he rode past—but did nothing about it and are condemned for their lack of enterprise. Browning's position in thus apparently advocating infidelity was once considered paradoxical or daring, but his 'moral' is obvious and indisputable. Sloth was one of the Church's seven deadly sins, and even in everyday ethics indecision, feebleness, procrastination are vices. The challenging three lines need no Roland's slug-horn, but might be strengthened:

*The sin I impute to each frustrate ghost  
Is—the unlit lamp and the ungit loin,  
The more so that the end in sight was also a vice.*

To plan evil (evil by the code of 1850, not that of which says 'all for love') and to be slothful about it is two sins. As a matter of fact Browning uses the words 'crime' and 'vice' for the prospected clopement, and reserves 'sin' for the failure to carry it out. Dr Inge's charge of 'antinomianism' in respect of the morality of this poem and *The Flight of the Duchess* is based on a clerical view that there is no 'higher law' than convention. A point that has to be taken into consideration is that the 'love' was plainly nothing more than a vapid variety of romantic love, so that it was doubtless best that it should not go beyond the dream. The finer lesson of the poem is expressed earlier:

*What is the use of the lip's red charm,  
The heaven of hair, the pride of the brow,  
And the blood that blues the inside arm—*

*Unless we turn, as the soul knows how,  
The earthly gift to an end divine?*

<sup>1</sup> Mr J. M. Cohen sees more in this poem than I do, and his book contains an admirable account of it.



The story, though interrupted once by Browning's love of historical detail, is swiftly told. The form is terza rima in octosyllables. Terza rima is said to be the most logical of verse forms, and there is a certain logical directness in the way the tale leads up to its moral.<sup>1</sup>

In *a Balcony*, the dramatic episode in which Norbert, the Queen's brilliant young minister, loves Constance, the Lady-in-Waiting, but is desired in marriage by the ageing Queen herself, is most intensely realized, but worked out in long and elaborate speeches of closely reasoned argument, which nevertheless carry themselves, being cast in admirably clear and dramatic blank verse: an example of thought in the garb of passion—amphibious. But there is no doubt about its powerful dramatic quality: in the longest speeches one is constantly aware that live people are talking together in vivid mutual relations. There is dramatic irony, tension, suspense, and a swift dramatic close.

The initial situation, where Norbert wishes to go to the Queen and ask that the reward of his services shall be Constance's hand, reminds of Robert, Elizabeth and Papa. 'Let me ask now, Love'—'Do, and ruin us.' Robert acquiesced, but Constance, who almost speaks words we have heard from Elizabeth,

*How content this man!  
I am not his—who change into himself,  
Have passed into his heart and beat its beats!*

has less authority, and Norbert has his way, though Constance contests his purpose from every angle, returning at last to the consideration which again might have come out of the Wimpole Street situation.

*And so we shall be ruined, both of us.  
Norbert, I know her to the skin and bone:  
You do not know her, were not born to it,  
To feel what she can see or cannot see.  
Love, she is generous—ay, despite your smile,  
Generous as you are: for, in that thin frame,  
Pain-twisted, punctured through and through with cares,  
There lived a lavish soul until it starved  
Debarred all healthy food.*

<sup>1</sup> There is a good examination of the moral issue in *L'Art et la Pensée de Robert Browning*, by Paul De Reul, pp. 210-12.

She persuades him at least to dissimulate, to pretend he wants Constance only because he cannot have the Queen:

*You pick up just a ribbon she has worn,  
To keep in proof how near her breath you came.*

So he goes to the Queen in the next room, leaving Constance alone. He must be absent, of course, at least for some minutes, while dance music is heard within, and the actress playing Constance is to show her quality.

Enter the Queen, all excited, to Constance, who presently—when the Queen says she had abjured the hope of being loved—jumps to what has happened and gives a gasp—‘Heaven!’ She makes brief non-committal replies to the Queen’s outpourings—she had supposed it was Constance that Norbert loved, but—‘he said you were the ribbon I had worn!’ She knows she is old, but ‘am I not left, my soul, myself?’ Young beauties have loved old poets, ‘why should not he the poems in my soul?’ At last, as the Queen repeats, ‘He loves me’, Constance sees her way and murmurs, ‘He shall!’ The Queen leaves her: she will walk around the rooms with her new crown, ‘and then come back to tell you how it feels’.

Now, as the music goes on, enter Norbert, not dreaming of the Queen’s mistake. Instead of explaining, Constance builds up his love in readiness for the trial she is soon to put him to: they talk passionately till the Queen returns, when Constance, who is more bright than brave, begins to talk feverishly in a way to entangle Norbert with the Queen: apparently she believes that the only means of averting doom is for Norbert to marry the Queen and have Constance for a mistress. The Queen, sensing a difficulty, speaks only once, to Norbert, ending, ‘as you choose me, so I choose you’. Norbert ignores this and again claims ‘The dearest richest beauteousest and best of women’ (an indefensible line). Constance turns and twists till Norbert begins to think she is double-crossing him, but the Queen has heard enough and after listening in silence to their amorous wrangling goes out. The lovers embrace: they hear the music stop and a measured tread approaching:

*Oh, some death  
Will run its sudden finger round this spark  
And sever it from the rest!*

And the soldiers come, clearly (though there has been some doubt about this) to arrest them.

It is one of Browning's finest dramatic scenes, but would not play well because of the length and close-knit fabric of the speeches.

*A Forgiveness* was chosen by Browning in 1885 as 'the narrative poem of moderate length by which he would wish to be represented'. It was certainly his last narrative poem showing genius (the *Pacchiarotto* volume was published in 1876), and on points would certainly take precedence over the three poems just considered. For one thing it is half the length of *In a Balcony* or *The Flight of the Duchess*, and though longer than *The Statue and the Bust* its narrative content is much larger: in other words the story of *A Forgiveness* is told with an economy rare with Browning in narrative other than very short (where he is matchless). If he allows himself any room at all he is inclined to put down all he knows. Framing the main story of *A Forgiveness* is another, suggested ingeniously and with dramatic brevity by a few words at the beginning and end of the poem—those which indicate the position and prospects of the monk who is taking the confession which constitutes the form of the story and necessitates a certain degree of conciseness.

There is much to admire as we go through the poem. As he comes home, the man of 'power and place', one afternoon, he sees a figure scurry off across the garden, a cloak over his face. He wonders with a smile which of the maids—'Carmen? Juana?'—has been entertaining a sweetheart; and then, with dramatic contrast:

*As I turned, there stood  
In face of me, my wife stone-still stone-white.*

She tells him she hates him and loves the other man:

'Kill me!'  
*We went in.*  
*Next day after this,*  
*I felt as if the speech might come. I spoke—*  
*Easily, after all.*

Three years of estrangement pass, till the wife asks for 'one short word' in his study 'for the remembrance' sake'. He says 'follow me thither',

but his mind is not on her but on the King's visit which has just marked a climax in his career. In the study she tells him it has all been a mistake:

*I loved you yet I lost you! May I go  
Burn to the ashes, now my shame you 'know?*

The lines that follow on this admission contain a cruel innuendo:

*I think there never was such—how express?—  
Horror coquetting with voluptuousness . . .*

(we think this is his comment on the wife's behaviour, but he goes on)

*As in those arms of Eastern workmanship;*

and continues with a long and brilliant description of such arms (of which Browning had a collection)—'Yataghan, kandjar', blades that 'writhe and bicker like a flame', and one particular favourite, a delicate blade with meandering lines and a jewelled handle in

*dim pellucid green,  
Carved, the hard jadestone, as you pinch a bean,  
Into a sort of parrot-bird! He pecks  
A grape-bunch; his two eyes are ruby-specks . . .*

There might seem some breach of the rule of economy in the length of this description, and of a preceding one of the underground chamber which is the 'study', but both are entirely relevant to the sinister atmosphere. He makes the wife write a brief confession in her own blood, and as this is obtained by puncturing her breast with a poisoned dagger she presently dies, while the husband's hate is turned against the other man, who perhaps entertains

*some faint hope he may elude  
My vengeance in the cloister's solitude.  
Hardly, I think! As little helped his brow  
The cloak then, Father—as your grate helps now!*

The setting is a Spanish one, and the character of the husband is

powerfully drawn in accordance with the general conception of the fierce pride of the Spaniard. He has rigid self-control:

*The thing I pity most  
In men is—action prompted by surprise  
Of anger.*

He can bid his spirit back to bounds like a chidden child. He boasts of his iron calm, is icily cruel in telling his wife how hate has turned to contempt, and when some sort of love returns it fires him to vengeance. Now this is very well in a Spaniard of (probably) some earlier day, but how if the character were transferred, with variations, to a nineteenth-century English husband? The situation and development of *A Forgiveness* are parallel to those of Meredith's *Modern Love*,<sup>1</sup> where too the wife has gone astray, husband and wife are similarly estranged and keep the fact concealed from the outer world, and the wife is again ultimately driven to suicide. But the line taken by the injured Victorian is less clear-cut than that of his Latin prototype—he is moved by spasms of sentiment, and descends to introducing a mistress into his wife's house. We dislike both husbands, but while there is a healthy admixture of fear in the case of the Spaniard, the other we can do little but detest. Browning wrote in detachment; Meredith's feeling over his own broken marriage perhaps blinded him to what sort of figure his hero was cutting (unless, as is always possible, he intended a back-handed satire on the male). Browning's wife is trivial, Meredith's pitiful and lovely. *A Forgiveness* is told in highly accomplished couplets, and keeps a perfectly consistent level of artistic achievement; *Modern Love*, in even more highly accomplished quatrains, runs generally at a lower artistic level, but rises in 'sonnets' (as it has become customary to call the poems) XVI, XLIII, XLVII and L, to heights of reflective lyric hardly known to Browning.

4

Browning had been writing for nine years before he condescended to a volume of short poems, but in 1842 the third *Bells and Pomegranates*, comprising the *Dramatic Lyrics*, showed that he had found the perfect medium for his genius, the short narrative poem. Most of the poems of

<sup>1</sup> I must ask forgiveness (myself) for seeming to pursue this marvellous poem-sequence with stones and shouts.

this volume (there were originally only sixteen) are narrative in substance though by their form properly described as lyrics, and it is remarkable how often the word 'perfect' springs to one's lips while reading them. The *Cavalier Tunes* have already been thus appraised; and the *Incident of the French Camp*, though destined for the school anthology, is beyond criticism in form: every phrase tells, there is not a superfluous word, and the metre has a trumpet's vigour. The *Soliloquy in a Spanish Cloister* is a glorious fragment of humorous character-drawing. *Porphyria's Lover* is as beautiful as its title. Having been published first as one of the two 'Madhouse Cells', it is generally regarded as an essay in the macabre, the words 'and strangled her', so strikingly placed, being read literally. It would evidently make the picture more pleasing if we could take them to mean 'pretended to strangle her', and since the rest of the poem favours this reading I do not see why we should not get pleasure instead of horror out of the poem. Browning is apt to be realistic in his details, and the sentence, 'again laughed the blue eyes without a stain', does not sound like an exact description of a girl's appearance after she has been strangled, nor would her cheek blush bright under a kiss. The last two lines—

*And all night long we have not stirred,  
And yet God has not said a word!*

—have a sinister ring, but lovers, both in good health, have been known to sit still together for quite a time, and if the second line was put in for the rhyme's sake it would not be the only time Browning sinned in that way.

But when I use the word 'perfection' it is of such a poem as *My Last Duchess* that I am thinking. Here is something that nobody but Browning could have done: I am not aware that anyone else ever attempted it. You have not only the character of an epoch, and a complex situation within that epoch, delineated absolutely, and with ease and economy, but a sheer triumph of form—the first example of Browning's almost unique gift (already shown here to perfection) of conversational verse.<sup>1</sup>

*She thanked men,—good! but thanked  
Somehow—I know not how—as if she ranked*

<sup>1</sup> In our own day Edward Thomas and Robert Frost have exercised the gift admirably but without Browning's swiftness and ease.

My gift of a nine-hundred-years'-old name  
With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame  
This sort of trifling? Even had you skill  
In speech—(which I have not)—to make your will  
Quite clear to such a one, and say, 'Just this  
Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,  
Or there exceed the mark'—and if she let  
Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set  
Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse,  
—E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose  
Never to stoop.

These are the rhythms and diction of exceptionally good forcible speech, dovetailed delicately into the metrical form of the rhymed couplets. The poem is direct and limpid and witty, and its charm is as lasting as that of a Chopin prelude or a water-colour by Turner.

And then there is *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*, which Browning wrote for little Willy Macready and only printed because *Bells and Pomegranates III* wanted one more poem to fill its sixteen pages. Is there a more wonderful children's tale in verse?—even in Lewis Carroll or Walter de la Mare? Only prose can furnish its equal—some masterpiece from the *Fairy Tales* of Hans Christian Andersen. Indeed, there is on record a children's party at the Storys' at which Andersen read *The Ugly Duckling* and Browning *The Pied Piper*!—a thought so marvellous that only in its own context is it credible. The *Pied Piper* is one of those minor works of art which give intense pleasure to the critic by reason of the perfect adaptation of means to ends. There is not a false step or a discordant note anywhere, not even in the uncouth little moralizing stanza xv. The humorous brilliance of the thing was made possible by his newly-discovered facility in double rhymes (afterwards to run away with him as wit did with Shaw). W. H. Griffin suggests that Browning derived the facility from his father, who also wrote a *Pied Piper*: but the elder Browning's rhymes are nothing but Barham and water (*Ingoldsby* was coming out in the magazines at this time), while his son's use of humorous rhyme is entirely individual. In *The Pied Piper* (as not always in the later poems) the rhymes flow with delicious naturalness out of the incidents and characters, and give no impression of being manufactured like those in Southey's *Lodore*. Though apparently nothing but exquisite talk in exquisite verse, the whole poem has a musical movement.

rising and falling as under a conductor's baton: there are climaxes, beautifully worked up to, in stanzas II, V, VII and XII, and a score of cunning modulations of tone, subtly linked with the phases of the story. The poem is admirably adapted for choral speaking.

There is one other brilliant short narrative in this group, *Artemis Prologizes*, told with swift economy and bright visual effects. Suiting the subject, the diction is classical and Tennysonian, a little like *Oenone*, but without the onomatopoeia and other sensuous beauties of that lovely poem. The verse paragraphs also are longer—too long in the second section, where a sentence of twenty-six lines includes a parenthesis of thirteen. The whole story goes in two long breaths, but this, masterfully managed, gives a close unity to the narrative, and the blank verse is as good as anything Browning wrote. It is just as well that the drama in the Greek style to which these hundred lines were to be a prologue was never written: Browning was already overburdened with plays at this period, and the inspiration lay fallow until *Balaustion's Adventure* was ready.

The 1845 volume, *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics*, is, as its title indicates, a mixed bag, but though it includes some exquisite lyrics, everything else is overshadowed by *The Bishop Orders his Tomb at St Praxed's*, which tells no tale but gives a lightning impression of a personality, a situation, and a civilization. Like *My Last Duchess* the poem is a finished and perfect work of art, but its aim is much more complicated. The soul of the Duke was a simple one—not much more than brainless aristocratic pride, like a hereditary nose. The Bishop's soul is appropriately more rich and multi-coloured: its groundwork is a lust for beauty, beauty of a splendid and flamboyant order, with delight in classical Latin as a somewhat inconsistent modifying influence; the spirit of his religious function, the mystic-materialism of the Roman Church—he hopes to lie in his tomb 'And see God made and eaten all day long'—is lost in his completely pagan mind and outlook (he wants on his tomb a vase showing

*The Saviour at his sermon on the mount,  
St Praxed in a glory, and one Pan  
Ready to twitch the Nymph's last garment off),*

and darkened by his mood of bitter humour; the few glimpses of Christian peace that he gets are afforded by old age and weakness. All



this, together with the group of 'nephews—sons inine' round the bed, and—as Ruskin said—'the whole spirit of the Renaissance', is conceived and executed with consummate ease and power, a humorous sympathy, a visual brilliance, in perfectly adapted blank verse, sinewy, colloquial, rising where required to melodiousness. It is perhaps not creation, but it is re-creation of a supreme kind, and the 'brush-work' is superlative.

The two companion pieces, *The Italian in England* and *The Englishman in Italy*, show that Browning's interest in Italy was already intense, a not uncommon thing with English people at the time. The first of the two poems could hardly be bettered as a piece of swift concise narrative, true and vivid in every detail, a picture of two patriots, heroic man and woman, and a characteristic tribute to the nobility of womanhood. The free-flowing octosyllabic couplets are ideal for the purpose. The other, more descriptive than narrative, has an appropriately looser verse-form, and is less well-shaped, just running on with Browning's unequalled facility. It is packed tight with the quaint ingredients of Italian rural life: 'such trifles', says Fortù, the beloved one; but, the Englishman reminds her, in England

*Men meet gravely to-day  
And debate, if abolishing Corn-laws  
Be righteous and wise!*

*The Glove* again shows Browning the complete master of the story so short as to be called an anecdote; it is the first example of his habit of giving a new twist to the end of a known event—in this case a feminist twist, with a clever last satiric word for the hero of the earlier tellings. The persistent double rhyme gives a jocular air to the story; it is dropped for the speech in which the lady defends her apparently frivolous action, this being the part Browning wanted taken seriously.

I suppose I must mention *How they Brought the Good News*, with its famous 'galloping metre', but I cannot bring myself to like the poem, partly because so many people think it is the best (or even the only) poem Browning wrote, but also because of the difficulty of seeing what the 'good news' can have been (if it was news of coming relief from siege there should have been mention of the enemies' lines). There was contemporary question, and Browning was patient of explanation; writing to the Rev D. Davies on 30th December 1881, he said, 'Would the object of the ride be clearer if you suppose that Ghent was invested

and reduced to extremity, that help was about to arrive in some unexpected way, and that intelligence of this—which would “save the city from its fate” of surrendering—must reach Ghent by some road still open—by an accident perhaps?”<sup>1</sup>

The great lyric period of *Men and Women* and *Dramatis Personæ* produced few pure narratives. The shortest of them, *A Light Woman*, is a little marvel—the bare bones of a story (or, as Browning suggests, a play), and yet everything is there in laconic hints, including full indications of the characters of the ‘three’—‘my friend, the mistress of my friend, with her wanton eyes, and me’. It is tooled with a lapidary art, and will endure when more grandiloquent things are lost. *Protus* again shows Browning at the height of his powers of concise, pregnant, pellucid narrative: What does it mean, this sketch of two emperors—the child Protus, worshipped and hymned, and suddenly abolished by John the blacksmith’s bastard, hammer of the Huns—and their two busts, the violet-crowned baby-face, and the rough-hewn ugly head in granite? Is it just the irony of fate, or the weakness of beauty before gross power in a world given over to violence? As the episode is entirely of Browning’s fabrication it should have some intention (but remember *Childe Roland!*). It is beautifully done, and its convincing use of fictive Roman material forecasts the astonishing inventions of Mr Thornton Wilder’s brilliant study of Julius Cæsar, *The Ides of March*.

The next piece of pure narrative is *Hervé Riel*, found in the *Pacchiarotto* volume, but printed earlier in *Cornhill*. It is a glorious yarn, and an admirable example of Browning’s rare use of irregular verse-form. Rapidity and excitement are achieved by the use of a flexible line of anapaestically stressed trochees with plenty of additional short syllables:

On the sea and at the Hogue sixteen hundred ninety two  
On the sea and at the Hogue sixteen hundred ninety two

The poem is Browning’s parallel to Tennyson’s *The Revenge*, and bears the same thematic relation to that poem as *The Ring and the Book* bears to *Idylls of the King*—obscure and foreign as against famous and English,

evidencing Browning's more original and less insular mind. *Hervé Riel* is as good in its swift movement and narrative force as *The Revenge* is with its more varied line, but it is entirely devoid of Tennyson's lyric form: it rouses, but it does not hurt; it is all in one key, while Tennyson's key changes over and over again; there is nothing in *Hervé Riel* to match the marvellous stanza ix of *The Revenge*—'And the sun went down and the stars came out far over the summer sea. . . .' It is superb journalism against moving poetry. Nevertheless, if Browning meant—in sending this 'Song of a Robin—Browning' to Cornhill, and wishing it were the 'Song of a Wren'—to compare it unfavourably with Tennyson's sickly *Song of the Wrens*, he was doing his poem an injustice.

We have observed that it was Browning's habit to give a new turn to the ends of his borrowed stories. He did this with *Hervé Riel*, but inadvertently. The celebrated modest claim of the French sailor for 'a good whole holiday' as his reward for saving the fleet—'That he asked and that he got, nothing more'—does not correspond with the facts, as Browning afterwards discovered and acknowledged. *Hervé Riel*, like a sensible and hard-headed Breton, took his discharge from the navy, but Browning's change made a more dramatic ending and the sailor a hero of legend: we respect the real man more, but in poetry we like the romantic gesture.

While hatching those philosophic eggs, the *Fancies* and the *Parleyings*, Browning occupied another part of his mind for several years with simple narrative, turning out the two sets of *Dramatic Idylls* and the *Jocoseria*. All the *Idylls* are told with a certain force, but the metres used preclude anything but plain tale-telling: no imaginative heights can be scaled by means of this wooden ladder. The best of the first series are *Halbert and Hob*, which gives a blinding glimpse of primitive man and his soul, and the wonderful story of *Ivàn Ivànovitch* and his axe. In the second series *Clive* gives a new turn to the story of the duel with the card-sharping officer; *Doctor* — is badly told in terza rima (it has been said that only Chaucer could have done justice to this story, but I should have liked R. H. Barham to try his hand); *Pan and Luna* is a beautiful piece handled rather awkwardly. Some of the *Jocoseria* have a philosophic intention, some are written in doggerel. The cruel story of *Donald*, told in very effective doggerel, was also narrated by Scott in excellent prose, and with an humanity equal to Browning's. The book ends on a chuckle—'[I] look to my ways but all the same offend with my

tongue, like Pambo!’ He does indeed, and one contrasts the duller matter and accomplished style of Wordsworth’s later poems. And yet, in the last collection of all, *Asolando*, published when he was seventy-seven, there are two narratives, admirably told, one in couplets the other in blank verse, in a manner not very much below the best of the earlier periods. These are *Beatrice Signorelli*, a satire re-telling a story of Balducci’s, and (much the finer) *‘Imperante Augusto natus est’*, where the thought of the impact on the world of the birth of Christ once again strikes fire on Browning’s imagination, as it had already done in *Cleon* and *Karshish*. A gift that never failed was that of re-creation of the past, for the evocation here of the Roman world just B.C. is hardly less brilliant than that of Renaissance Italy done more than forty years earlier. And the first twenty lines of *Development*, beginning, ‘My father was a scholar and knew Greek’, and going on to tell of the reconstruction of Troy and its siege on the dining-room floor, with the cat for Helen and the pony sulking in the stable for Achilles—this is done with a force of pure narrative and brilliant verse-paragraphing never excelled by the earlier Browning, or indeed by any other poet.

Apart from *Pippa Passes*, which is a genuine play, *Paracelsus*, a dialogue, and short scenes like *In a Balcony*, Browning was responsible for seven plays, which occupied at least half his time, and energy from 1837 to 1846. I use the word ‘responsible’ because Browning must bear the responsibility for having wasted so much time, and the word ‘wasted’ because there is very little distinguished work in all the seven. Browning was self-critic enough to write to Elizabeth in February 1845, ‘[Luria] shall be my last play—for it is but a play, woe’s me!’ Presently he was saying, ‘I have of late lost interest in dramatic writing [i.e. plays], as you know and perhaps occasion’. Yet in 1885 he was rash enough to tell Laurence Barrett, who had produced *A Blot in the ‘Scutcheon* successfully in America, that with such encouragement he might have gone on writing plays to the end. Fortunately for us, the new unifying influence which came into his life in 1845 brought him to a sense of the necessity for writing only what would express him fully, as no exercise in play-writing could do. That he looked on the plays as exercises is shown, I think, by his writing to Fanny Haworth when he was contemplating *The Return of the Druses*, saying he wanted, ‘a subject of the most wild

and passionate love . . . a thorough self-devotement, self-forgetting', and asking whether it should be 'a woman who loves thus or a man'.

He had no théâtre-sense at all. His people talk in shapeless and endless sentences which it is impossible to follow with the ear (the long speeches in Shakespeare and Shaw are perfectly clear). A sentence will be cut short in the middle and left meaningless. A long sentence turns out to be a question, the only indication being the question-mark at the end. The characters are given to 'asides' so long that one wonders how the other characters—sometimes a single interlocutor—can have occupied themselves in the meanwhile. A man will utter a thoughtful 'aside' while another man is holding him by the throat. Act II of *The Return of the Druses* consists almost entirely of 'asides', several lengthy 'asides' following each other without any words spoken aloud at all: an 'aside' of seventeen lines is followed by another of thirty-seven. In *A Soul's Tragedy* there is a long speech given to 'The Populace (speaking together)'. In short the plays were written for the study, and Macready and Helen Faucit and others who staged them must have used their discretion on these and other acting absurdities, though the numerous deaths from emotional stress would have to be accepted.

All the plays are short (the longest about as long as *Macbeth*), and all except *Colombe's Birthday* are tragedies, a fact which argues a certain lack of confidence by Browning in his powers as a playwright (I suppose it is easier to write a tragedy than a comedy). The democratic thread which is said to run through the plays is rather flimsy, and here and there is abandoned altogether, as where King Charles, having arrested and deposed his tyrannical father, King Victor, reinstates him simply out of filial affection. Blank verse is stilted in *Strafford*, conventional in *King Victor*, good but rhetorical in *The Druses*, often admirable in *A Blot* and *Colombe's Birthday*, clear and forcible in *Luria* and *A Soul's Tragedy*. The prose in which the second act of the last play is cast is good and strong but not original or idiomatic or dramatic.

Two of the plays stand head and shoulders above the others. *A Blot in the Scutcheon* is modelled on *Romeo and Juliet*, but it is a blend of this play and *Much Ado about Nothing* with the brother-clement from *Maud*. The initial situation is human and understandable, and the problem is clearly stated, with the note of doom—sin followed by punishment—faintly sounding. When the men, like those of *Much Ado*, desert Mildred, Gwendoline, like Beatrice, stands by her, but how inadequate

(except that it too works) is Gwendoline's long reasoning speech (with its 'if . . . if . . . if') beside Beatrice's curt dry observations leading up to her thrilling, 'Kill Claudio!' Nevertheless, Gwendoline's instinctive realization of the truth is wonderfully conveyed, and apart from the long unactable sentence mentioned the scene is superb, with Browning the feminist in charge. Given the seventeenth-century code, the play works admirably to its conclusion, and yet the tragedy seems small beside that of *Romeo and Juliet*, because these lovers are not 'star-crossed' but the victims of narrow prejudice and their own folly. Our final feeling is not one of awed acceptance of tragic fate but of extremely human dissatisfaction. However, the play is not 'puzzling and unpleasant', as *The Times* critic of the day found it.

*Luria* is the other good play. The 'plot' is single and direct, though there is no action; it is all argument, but argument about a vital matter. Luria, a 'noble Moor', but having no other resemblance to Othello, finds himself in a difficult and dramatic situation. He is a victorious commander in the service of Florence. Now it appears that fifteenth-century Florence had the Machiavellian habit of appointing a commander and exiling or executing him as soon as he had won his victories and removed the external danger—the idea being to forestall the other danger of the successful general becoming too powerful. Luria, learning of this sordid mixture of prudence, mistrust, ingratitude and treachery, is urged by his friends to turn on Florence as Coriolanus did on Rome, not necessarily in revenge but to teach the city a lesson and lead her to reform her base ways. He however feels himself a child of Florence, and rather than either submit or resist takes poison, though just before he dies news comes that his virtues have triumphed with the Council and he has been confirmed in his position. We feel that his suicide was regrettable but inevitable, and the presentation of his splendid combination of mildness and heroism gives great pleasure. The verse is as plain and direct as the construction, and no one utters a single 'aside' in this play or the next, the last two of the series.

Browning, like Tennyson, was a product of the un-theatrical nineteenth century, and it must be said that his attempts to fill the stage were on the whole less successful than those of his great contemporary, though, as in other matters, more original and interesting. By the end of his 'first period' he knew he was no Shakespeare, and when, in the last stanza of *A Light Woman*, he spoke of himself as a 'writer of plays', it was only because the word he had to rhyme with was 'stays'.

## 6

'Robert won't listen to a story for its own sake'—so said Elizabeth, one of Robert's soundest critics; and it followed that he was disinclined to write a (long) story for its own sake. Almost all the longer narratives have a moral or psychological *raison d'être*. 'Incidents in the development of a soul', or the profitable development of the souls of his readers—these were the ends and aims he had before him when he set out to create such poems as *Paracelsus* and *Red Cotton Night-cap Country*. And though his boyhood interest in crime enabled him to look at the Franceschini story—'my Italian murder thing'—without sheering away from its brutality, it was the opportunities it offered for psychological research that really attracted him. The opportunities were not so much offered as painfully discovered by this special passion of his. The crude story of the documents has not much more psychology than may be found in a slaughter-house, but years of brooding made the desert blossom.

It is undeniable that Browning was a great narrative poet. He fairly leapt at a story, and seldom failed to tell it with sustained gusto, and if in spite of this his long narratives do not always hold the attention it is because the story-interest so often yields to the psychological or moral urge. He is all but incapable of allowing a story to tell itself, as do *The Knight's Tale*, *Hero and Leander*, *Tam o' Shanter*, *Manfred*, *Michael*, *The Eve of St Agnes*, and *Sohrab and Rustum*. I am speaking now of his 'long' narratives. Of all these only *Balaustion's Adventure* is inspired completely by pure narrative intention. In *Paracelsus* and *Red Cotton Night-cap Country* the moral purpose never sleeps; the psychological problems of the Lady and the Good Young Man alone make the footling story of *The Inn Album* worth while; in *Sordello* psychology and morality are paired to draw the ponderous weight of the poem, 'Sordello's story', being, as Browning says in the dedication to Milsand, mere 'historical decoration'.

And yet he once compared himself to the Sultau who could not give the order for execution while there was a story to come. This passion got itself reflected in his work only in his short story poems, but there reflected most brilliantly. The discipline of form reached him only here: faced by the necessity—sometimes self-imposed, as in *Protus*, but more often an inner necessity, as in *A Light Woman* or *My Last Duchess*—of telling the story with the utmost economy, he wrote scores of short

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narrative poems where the cameo art is a constant joy to study; this clear-cut form with a pure narrative content is seen also in some of the long-short poems—*In a Balcony* and *A Forgiveness*. In other words he is at his best in narrative when the idea of a story struck him with lyric intensity, imposing lyric form or the curt outline of a dramatic scene.



# ‘A sermon which now I preach’

## I

UP TO THIS POINT I have been concerned, primarily, with form. The purest poetry may be cast into the form of a lyric or a narrative. The present chapter will be concerned primarily, indeed almost wholly, with the largely unpoetic content of those poems into which Browning packed his thoughts on religion and on life in its larger and lesser aspects. He did this more and more as he grew older, but he began doing it at twenty-three, with *Paracelsus*. Elizabeth encouraged him, dangerously: ‘No one thinks like you’, she told him in 1846. Later, in 1864, he became very positive about it: ‘I live more and more for God not man. . . . I need increasingly to tell the *truth*’, he wrote to Julia Wedgwood, not content with Wordsworth’s ‘random truths’, or with what Mr Geoffrey Tillotson calls ‘the consoling ambiguity of poetry’. The practice brought him eventually his multitude of disciples, for more people care about truth than about beauty. As Mr Dobree says, Browning is enjoyed for other than poetic reasons (but could we not say the same about Shakespeare and most of the people who enjoy him?).

Browning is, for good or evil, a philosophic poet, but he is not an essayist, or even—except in the *Fancies* and the *Parleyings*—a didactic poet. He is, for at least half his time, an ostensibly ‘dramatic’ poet, and he objected to the opinions of the persons of his drama being regarded as necessarily his own. But like the lady in the play, he protested too much. I believe that his constant insistence on the ‘dramatic’ intention of everything he wrote after *Pauline* was a rather childish reaction to Mills’s equally childish objections to this poem. He determined, like his *pictor ignotus*, not ever again to lay bare his soul: ‘at least no merchant traffics in my heart’; he would not ‘sonnet-sing you about myself’, and scoffed at the idea that ‘with this key Shakespeare unlocked his heart’. In this last he was probably right, but in a general way a poet is given a heart and a soul for the express purpose of ‘unlocking’ them to his readers, and it was only soreness that made Browning wish not to join those—Wordsworth, Keats, Tennyson, Arnold and others—who have done so to our edification. But Browning had not the true dramatist’s art of self-suppression: his puppets are almost as ventriloquial as Shaw’s.

Everybody accepts this in the case of the Pope in *The Ring and the Book*, and it is perfectly easy to distinguish those quite few characters, such as Blougram, Sludge, Caliban, Juan, whose opinions are not to be identified with those of their creator. There is a large consistency among the religious, philosophical and ethical views expressed by most of his people, and we have no difficulty in building up an impression of how he looked at life. And if a poem is quite obviously written with the purpose of expounding Browning's views on an important subject, as *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* was, I am prepared to treat it as such, even if he maintained that this poem, too, was 'dramatic'.

Dr Raymond seems to regard *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* as having been prompted by, and as being a reply to, Strauss's *Des Leben Jesu*. I wonder if this is so. Whether or not Browning read the book (in George Eliot's translation, published in 1846) there can be no doubt that he was aware of the spirit of rationalism that had been rampant since the eighteenth century, and was now coming (in modified form) very close to the heart of things. But the kind of stimulus which set Browning's mind and pen working controversially was personal and private rather than public; you can see this in *Sludge* and *Blougram*, *Fine* and *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau*. And I see the point of departure of *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* rather in two of the *Letters*. On 2nd August 1845 Elizabeth wrote:

I used to go with my father always, when I was able, to the nearest dissenting chapel of the Congregationalists—from liking the simplicity of their praying and speaking without books—and a little too from disliking the theory of State churches. There is a narrowness among the dissenters which is wonderful; an arid, grey Puritanism in the clefts of their souls; but it seems to me clear that they know what the 'liberty of Christ' means, far better than those do who call themselves 'churchmen'; and stand altogether, as a body, on higher ground.

On 15th August 1846, less than a month before the marriage, she wrote in similar terms at rather greater length.<sup>1</sup> These passages seem to me to contain at least the germ of *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day*, the first

<sup>1</sup> The second passage has been quoted in this connection by F. R. G. Duckworth and others, but I believe the passage from the letter of 2nd August 1845 to be the one more likely to have set Browning's mind working.

product of the married years. The theme is likely to have been carried on in conversation, as well as through communion of spirit, and Elizabeth had already urged Robert to 'write out of his own personality'; he himself had sworn that his next work should be '*R.B. a Poem*'—so that it is permissible to take (as Professor Charlton does) the 'I' of the poem to be a projection, at least a 'dramatization', of himself. And though the 'rationalist' section of *Christmas-Eve* seems to have no origin in the passages quoted from the *Letters*, we shall find it no more closely derivative from Strauss.

I am considering *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* first among the poems with a religious content because it is desirable first to establish Browning's position with regard to the Churches, and the former of the two halves of this double poem argues the relative values of Dissent, Ritualism, and Rationalism, though it is more important as containing one of the few passages on which we can found a mystical claim for Browning.

The early sections suggest that Browning set out with the intention of following the Wordsworthian theory of poetic diction more closely than Wordsworth himself ever did: the diction and versification are at first painfully undistinguished, with amateurish lapses, and soon begin to include those double and treble rhymes of his with their temptation to the irrelevant and disturbing. But the picture of the chapel and its congregation is horribly realistic, though lacking the genius presently displayed over St Peter's at Rome. At last the poem grows more serious (though the only improvement in style is the dropping to single rhymes), and begins the analysis of the virtues of Dissent: (a) this is a natural religion, a church of nature, not a 'narrow shrine'; (b) it concentrates on the love rather than on the power of God. Browning puts this second conception, the most important in his armoury of religious thought, into one of the most forceful images he ever produced. Shelley had said:

*All love is good:  
It makes the reptile equal with the god.*

This is not true. However highly we think of love, its combination with the qualities of a god must be a richer one than its combination with those of a reptile. But Browning takes the image and makes it exact:

*The loving worm within its clod  
Were diviner than the loveless god  
Amid his worlds, I will dare to say.*

If both have love, the god must be still the greater, but the god who lacks the divine essence of love is in a lower class than the worm that has love, even though the loving worm may be at the bottom of its class and the loveless god at the top of his. These chapellers, uncouth as they are, know that the test of God is his manifestation of infinite goodness and love.

So far argument, without much poetic value. Now comes the brilliant description of the moon-explosion followed by the moon-rainbow. The whole experience, one cannot doubt, had been Browning's own, and so with the mystic vision into which the natural experience turned. He feels that he is alone in seeing the lunar spectacle:

*This sight was shown me, there and then—  
Me, one out of a world of men,  
Singled forth. . . .*

and as, his brain 'glutted with the glory', he calls on God to appear—suddenly

*He was there,  
He himself with his human air.*

The vision of the face of Christ which follows, the beholder prostrate before it, 'saturate with brightness', and the sense of 'the body caught up in the whirl and drift of the vesture's amplitude', so that he was 'sucked along in the flying wake'—all this is beyond the conception of one who had not experienced something akin to what is described, and if Browning ever had a mystic experience remotely resembling this he could claim to belong to the company of Jacob Boehme, Meister Eckhart, Juliana of Norwich and St Teresa, even if only to its fringe.

There follows a wonderful impression of St Peter's and of the Roman mass. Heavy stress is laid on the grossness of the yoke, the errors, perversities and lies which Browning perceived in the Roman practice, but he admits there is love here too in terms of praise, worship and beauty. The element of pure love in Christianity eventually overthrew the

massive intellect of antiquity, and though love and intellect should both function, it is love that is of primary importance.

So he comes to the pure intellect of the rationalists. His approach lacks seriousness, but the satire is as pointed as that directed against the squalor of the chapel and the disingenuousness of Rome. The rationalist case is stated in caricature. And it is not Strauss who is caricatured, but the far less intellectual order of rationalism which simply rejects the 'Christ myth' and puts in its place a figure assessed as 'the best of men'. Strauss did indeed dissolve away most of the 'myth' and declare that the nucleus of 'fact' remaining was devoid of supernatural significance. But this was part of his process of developing the Hegelian conception of highest truth emerging—without historical basis—from the Christ-idea itself, a necessity of thought. Strauss's purpose was first to undermine faith in the fallible and destructible witness of history, and then to build again on a firmer foundation; to compel Christianity to advance from being a history-faith to the position of a higher truth receiving its object from thought alone. (A position as open to danger from an argument as the other from a discovery.) There is no hint of this in the poem, and the position was so closely related to Browning's own attitude to essential Christianity on the one hand and to Scriptural revelation on the other that it is difficult to believe he would have ignored it, as he does, if he had been writing with the *Leben Jesu* deliberately in mind.

As the man of the poem is congratulating himself on his ability to see the good in each of the three points of view, he finds the robe of Christ has slipped from his hold. He waits for its return, meditating on the possibility of finding the best form of worship. As for him, he can only testify God's care for him:

*No mere mote's breadth but seems immense  
With witnessing's of Providence.*

The moon-rainbow was, he feels sure, sent by God to heal his soul: the vision was no hallucination. He finds the vesture's hem within his grasp again, and himself swept back into the little chapel. The dull sermon is still going on, but muddy water will quench the thirst which a beautiful but empty chalice leaves unassuaged. Here alone there is water to drink, so he accepts that God prefers the simplest possible form of sincere worship to the buffooneries of the Pope and the 'myths' of the Professor. Here is 'unlearned love', and 'I choose here'. (When it was pointed out

that love without beauty produced a grimly ascetic picture, Browning replied that 'the asceticism was one side of the question'.)

At various points in the poem he has asserted his right to worship God in his own way—'I have my own church equally', 'the clue God gave me as most fit to guide my footsteps through life's maze', 'let me enjoy my own conviction'—yet he felt he must come down on the side of one of the organized religions, so, like his wife—and like his father—he chose Dissent. It was doubtless the demands of poetic emphasis and economy that made him confine his attention to the extreme points of the triangle, neglecting, for instance, the Anglican compromise.

*Christmas-Eve* is not a great poem. The only elements of high excellence lie in the moon-scape and the powerful impression of the mystic experience. Nevertheless there is much that is imaginative, and more that is brilliantly concrete: for *Easter-Day* there is less to be said, since it is largely composed of argument. It is divided into two parts, neither seeming to have much personal connection with Browning. The first part is a straightforward dialogue on faith—its desirability, its reasonableness. There are a few humorous touches which add drama to the argument but hint that it is not to be taken too seriously. It begins with the celebrated observation—'How very hard it is to be a Christian!'—and goes on to anticipate some of Blougram's points. If only one could *know* that the command to believe came directly from God, how simple obedience would be; yet,

*You must mix some uncertainty  
With faith if you would have faith be.*

But the disputation leads nowhere, and presently the second part opens with one of the speakers (call him Browning) beginning to relate an experience. He was crossing the common which had been the scene of *Christmas-Eve*, wondering as he went what his faith was worth. Suddenly he thinks the Day of Judgment has arrived, for there is a dazzle of Northern Lights. This is less vividly described, less deeply felt, than the lunar blaze of the other poem, but again out of this splendour of light is born a mystic vision of Christ:

*HE stood there. Like the smoke  
Pillared over Sodom when day broke—  
I saw Him.*

It would seem to be the same vision arising out of the same experience differently described. As before, the narrator 'fell before His feet, a mass, no man now'.

Christ tells him he has failed in his 'probation' through having taken too great joy in earth and its pleasures: his punishment is to be condemned to earth. His satisfaction at the lightness of the sentence calls forth a reproof which brings him low again, and he asks humbly if he may, on earth, seek delight in art, or in works of the mind. These being shown inadequate, he thinks he perceives the truth:

*Behold, my spirit bleeds,  
Catches no more at broken reeds—  
But lilies flower those reeds above:  
I let the world go, and take love!*

Christ tells him this is a better choice, but it still falls far short of the love of God, from which he seems to shrink. There is a curiously interesting pre-statement here of the thought to which Francis Thompson afterwards gave such lavish development in *The Hound of Heaven*:

*All thou dost enumerate  
Of power and beauty in the world  
The mightiness of love has curled  
Inextricably round about.  
Love lay within it and without  
To clasp thee—but in vain! Thy soul  
Still shrunk from Him who made the whole,  
Still set deliberate aside  
His love!*

He feels unable to rise to the demand, but prays for strength to go on loving and so 'reach one eve the Better Land', upon which 'the whole God within His eyes embraced me'. Life begins again: he still finds it 'hard to be a Christian',

*But Easter Day breaks! But  
Christ rises! Mercy every way  
Is infinite—and who can say?*

Though the mystic vision of Easter Day is pale beside that (the same one, I think) of *Christmas-Eve*, the religious feeling of the second poem is the more intense, but the sense of God never gets into the verse as it does with the real poetic mystics, Francis Thompson or Joseph Plunkett, Herbert or Crashaw. We can safely say *this* is not the 'Poem: R.B.' that had been promised Elizabeth; it was, indeed, poetically, a poor result of the first years of marriage, though doubtless some of the *Men and Women* were on the anvil during this period.

Having in *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* given an almost mathematical demonstration of his orientation in matters of worship, Browning took great care in a number of other places to show where he did *not* stand. The arrows of satire he aimed at Rome were launched from innumerable loopholes. Before 1850 the shafts were not too keen. The horrible picture of the unscrupulous use of the confessional for political purposes is balanced by the beauty of holiness that speaks in *The Boy and the Angel*; and it is a humorous eye that observes the weaknesses of monastic seclusion and episcopal indulgence in the *Spanish Cloister* and *St Praxed's* ('just the thing for the time, what with this Oxford business', he said, sending it to *Hood's*). Moreover, Calvinism comes under no less savage indictment in *Johannes Agricola*, where the inhuman doctrine of the elect and the damned is enunciated as the ghoulish meditation of a madman.

After the mingled appreciation and censure of Rome in *Christmas-Eve*, the emphasis is in subsequent poems almost entirely on dislike. In *The Ring and the Book* we have indeed the beautiful portrait of Innocent XII, but this is painted in unsectarian colours of pure humanity and simple religion, and against it we are bound to set the dreadful Archbishop who unloosed Pompilia's praying hands 'from harassing his gout', and carried her forcibly back to Guido to be ruled and corrected. Even in the case of the Pope we must not forget his own demonstration of the unanswerable case against Papal infallibility, and his scathing strictures on the apathy and cynicism of his clergy—the one bright spot a priest who rebelled against the Church's rule and acted from native goodness and love. This same Caponsacchi has his own comments to make on the results of his rescue—his being judged no longer fit companion for

*Your gay Abati with the well-turned leg  
And rose i' the hat-rim, Canons, cross at neck*



*And silk mask in the pocket of the gown,  
Brisk Bishops with the world's muck still unbrushed  
From the rochet.*

We have one of the most effective of Browning's frequent jibes at 'sacred relics', telling how Guido died in view of St Mary's Church,

*Where they possess, and showed in shrine to-day,  
The blessed Umbilicus of our Lord  
(A relic 'tis believed no other church  
In Rome can boast of).*

And in the first Book, very much from Browning's own mouth, there is the wonderful passage explaining how 'Religion' looked on approvingly at the application of mediæval 'torture-engines' until civil law grew more humane, whereupon Religion 'started up, stared amain', and acquiesced, Browning's comment being that if we had waited for the Church to insist on finding truth by milder means, 'we should wait long indeed'. Against all which censure there stands, with the Pope, the one beneficent figure of Celestino, the Augustinian monk who confessed Pompilia.

The most deliberate and sustained satire on Roman Catholicism is contained in *Bishop Blougram's Apology*. The portrait of the prelate is supposed to be based on Father Prout (of *Fraser's*) as to externals, and on Cardinal Wiseman for the opinions expressed. Browning did not think the portrait was an unkind one, or the poem hostile to Rome, and this suggests that the motive was personal rather than public, a *feu de joie* rather than a military bombardment. But no writer with Browning's outlook could invent arguments for a Catholic bishop except in terms of satire, and if Wiseman reviewed the poem 'not disapprovingly' that was because the Roman Catholic mind is impervious to criticism, seeing as virtues what its critics regard as faults. But could satire go deeper than Browning's final comment—that Blougram 'believed, say, half he spoke', shaped the rest 'for argumentary purposes', gave out 'arbitrary accidental thoughts' as fixed convictions, and ignored the 'hell-deep instincts' of the human mind?—while 'Gigadibs the literary man', the Bishop's light antagonist, is shown finally as putting his somewhat arid faith into deeds, setting out to 'cultivate his garden', and probably getting to the desired end—the last chapter of St John—in his own way.

The views Browning put into Blougram's mouth are those which he supposed a Roman Catholic Bishop would express if cornered in company where he could dare to be frank. The treatment is much like that accorded to *Sludge*: the Bishop is made to admit that most of his beliefs are spoof, but is credited with some feelings that are deep, real and interesting. We must not be blinded to the essential hollowness of the performance by the imaginative power of the poem's two climaxes, both concerned with the excellence of doubt. Faith, Blougram admits, is disturbed by doubt, but if we should abandon faith:

*all we've gained is, that belief,  
As unbelief before, shakes us by fits,  
Confounds us like its predecessor. Where's  
The gain? how can we guard our unbelief,  
Make it bear fruit to us?—the problem here.  
Just when we're safest, there's a sunset-touch,  
A fancy from a flower-bell, some one's death.  
A chorus-ending from Euripides,—  
And that's enough for fifty hopes and fears  
As old and new at once as nature's self,  
'To rap and knock and enter in our soul,  
Take hands and dance there, a fantastic ring,  
Round the ancient idol, on his base again,—  
The grand Perhaps!*

And further on he declares that placid belief is enervating:

*No, when the fight begins within himself,  
A man's worth something. God stoops o'er his head,  
Satan looks up between his feet—both tug—  
He's left, himself, i' the middle: the soul wakes  
And grows.*

But for the most part his arguments are on the lower level of simple worldliness. Here too we have an imaginative contribution in the form of the admirable figure, extended in great detail, of the 'cabin voyage' across 'the ocean of this life'. The metaphor, as developed, is not quite water-tight (if I may put it that way). The trouble with Gigadibs was not that he brought too much 'cabin furniture' but too little; if Blou-

gram had told him—'You have been roughly handled because you tried to come on board stark naked', the parallel would have been closer. The Bishop's exposition concerns itself mainly with the material benefits of holding to 'the Way, the Truth, the Life'. He begins by agreeing that as a highly-placed Catholic he is not free to think things out for himself, but is tied to certain doctrines and dogmas—but acceptance of these beliefs has given him position, power and wealth. The passage quoted showing that a life of faith diversified by doubt is merely another aspect of a life diversified by faith, is followed by the boast that the former pays better—'bears me fruit in power, peace, pleasantness and length of days'. A faith must be fixed and precise, like the Roman, before it can be an instrument of power. It is the claim to be the sole possessor of God's purpose that gives the priest his iron hold on the ignorant masses. He acknowledges that he feeds on the fawning and flattery his position brings him:

*In many ways I need mankind's respect,  
Obedience, and the love that's born of fear.*

He admits (to the harmless journalist) that the outlook described is a low one, but he claims that the intellectuals do not despise him—on the contrary are interested to note that a man of brains can accept irrational dogma. He is unwilling even to discredit the grosser elements of the Catholic teaching, such as miraculous liquefaction of the blood of saints, because it is a case of all or nothing:

*First cut the Liquefaction, what comes last  
But Fichte's clever cut at God himself?*

As for 'natural religion', not based on revelation, it would be insufficient to restrain from sin and crime.

The monologue is a queer mixture of sophistry, special pleading and half-truths. As a dramatic creation it stands very high, though lower than that of the earlier Bishop with the simpler mind and more likeable personality. The setting is perfect, the colloquial blank verse quite wonderful, and the length just right—agreeably shorter than *Sludge*, with succinct prose-material instead of poetic sentiment.

With *The Heretic's Tragedy* Browning turned from good-humoured satire on civilized verbal jugglery to fierce exposure of the barbarity of

the medieval Church, the 'heresy' of the victim at the stake being but that God is too good to have decreed eternal hell for sinners. The poem is a deliberate essay in the macabre, its technique so marvellous, with its sinister directions and chorus, its cumulative detail, so realistic and relentless, building up its impression of monstrous cruelty, that one suspects a streak of callousness in the writer who could carry through such a performance with such apparent zest. Its special power lies in the studied unobtrusiveness of direct comment.

Leaving *Men and Women*, we have already seen *Red Cotton Night-cap Country* full of jeers at flint-hearted priests and money-grubbing monks and nuns, with an, alas! that the harassed Miranda turned to the Virgin of the Ravissante instead of to the generous and sensible Milsand. It contains also the most amusing of the satires on the 'miracles' of the Church. Miranda, brooding on his Tower, says that God can make out of nothing an insect with ten legs, but if he, Miranda, were to go into church and ask for one of his ten burnt-off fingers to be restored the priests would push him out, protesting:

*No faith obtains—in this late age at least—  
Such cure as that! We ease rheumatics though!*

It is in this poem, too, that, anticipating the *Insect Play*, Browning compares the mercenary priest and nun to a beetle trundling a dung-ball.

Later still, there is *Cenci*, a not very hoteworthy poem, written with a single satiric purpose—to tell how the Cardinal promised the Governor 'the Hat and Purple' if he would secure the conviction of the innocent Onofrio—because 'the Cardinal's desire was to a dame whose favour was Onofrio's'. God's justice, the tale begins:

*'God's justice'—of the multiplicity  
Of such communications extant still,  
Recording, each, injustice done by God  
In person of His Vicar-upon-earth;*

and ends with a chuckle at the Vatican's expense: \*

*God's justice . . .  
Ayl or how otherwise had come to pass  
That Victor rules, this present year, in Rome?*

That Browning did not keep his satire for Roman Catholicism but was prepared to extend it to the errors of the wider Christian Church is shown in *Holy-Cross Day*, that fine companion piece to *The Heretic's Tragedy*, equally full of profound pity. Here we have moved into a period where fire has given way to mere brutality and contemptuous persecution. The poem begins in bitter humour, grows to tragedy and eventually to sublimity. Another poem on this matter, *Filipino Baldinucci on the Privileges of Burial*, came twenty years later, a long doggerel poem in which though the Christians are satirized the Jews are presented in a hardly more favourable light. Some poems in *Asolando*, such as *The Cardinal and the Dog* and *The Pope and the Net*, show that Browning maintained his anti-Roman sentiments to the very end, though this did not prevent his practice of public worship 'being reasonably 'catholic'. Nor did it prevent, as Professor Charlton points out, his most deeply religious character being his Pope, his most purely religious a simple Catholic wife, and the sublimest innocence of faith being shown in a young Roman Catholic girl.

## 2

On the strength of the vision of Christ in *Christmas-Eve* I ventured to put Browning among the Christian mystics, though not (as W. R. Inge and the compilers of *The Oxford Book of Mystical Verse* do) among the mystical poets. A single experience will suffice to make a man a mystic, but it needs more than a single mystical poem to give a poet the right to the description. Browning's expression of mysticism in poetry goes beyond, but not far beyond, the single example so far regarded.

Inge provided two satisfactory definitions of mysticism. One—'the feeling of being enveloped by the all-embracing Spirit of the cosmos'. When this 'Spirit' is identified with the Christian God we may call the person who enjoys this feeling a Christian mystic. Second—'that attitude (elsewhere "habit") of mind which divines the spiritual in the common things of life': this is not, like the first, a religious sense at all. Either of these two may exist without the other in the mind of any given individual, but one will generally induce the other. Browning shows possession of the first, in its specific Christian form, only, I think, in *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day*, but of the second more frequently.

*The Oxford Book of Mystical Verse* includes seven poems or passages from poems by Browning. One is the vision of Christ from *Easter-Day*.

The others are *Abt Vogler* and *Rabbi Ben Ezra*, with parts of *Saul*, *Paracelsus* and *Pauline*. The lines from *Pauline* are those beginning, 'O God, where do they tend, these struggling aims?' and ending with 'Or witnessing these outbursts from the tomb'. This seems to me to express a passionate yearning to enter into a communion with God and Christ, but not a mystic sense of having done so. A similar *non placet* lies against the first passage quoted from *Paracelsus*, Book I—'Truth is within ourselves. . . . Supposed to be without'. This is a psychological explanation (arrived at by intellectual process and akin to the Socratic doctrine of memory) of the nature of knowledge. In *Rabbi Ben Ezra* I have already pointed to one burst of mystical feeling in the passionate sense of man's soul as a cup from which God drinks the foaming wine of joy; apart from this the religious content of the poem is again intellectual. Man is no passive recipient, but a striving essence fired by a spark from God. Body exerts its drag, but 'at its best' can help the soul as wings carry the bird. So with age: it is not the end of life but the beginning of a new adventure, and a period in which the failures of youth—ignored by 'the world's coarse thumb' but accepted by God—can be assessed and brought to fruition in the mind. The vessel on the wheel has still to be finished and made perfect for the use of God. All this is profoundly important: it is in the highest degree inspiring; it makes life nobler, richer, braver. But it is neither mystical, nor specifically Christian. The triumphant chant with which David concludes his great performance before Saul once more shows an intellectual rather than a mystical understanding of God's purpose. The 'report' on creation had been 'received in the brain'. There has 'entered his mind' a realization that love in man's nature must be a reflection of love in his creator. It is logic that leads his mind to the point where it grasps 'the topmost ineffablest, uttermost crown'—the conception of the love of God incarnate in Christ. This is not the way the mystic knows God.

Apart, then, from the *Easter-Day* (or *Christmas-Eve*) vision we are left with a second passage from *Paracelsus*, and *Abt Vogler*, both of which are truly mystical in Inge's second sense. The passage from *Paracelsus* occurs in Book V, and is part of the great dying speech of the philosopher. It consists of the fifty-odd lines, 'I knew, I felt . . . faculties of man'. The poet, speaking through *Paracelsus*, knows and feels 'what God is, what we are, what life is': knows this not by 'narrow thought' but 'in every shift and change in the spirit, nay, in every pore of the body, even'. This is one way of describing the mystic function, and the

same faculty continues to operate to enable the poet to enter into the varied life of the earth, which is a feature in the infinite life of God. The divine immanence which inspires the picture seems to be of the order known as pantheism, but the poetic and mystical power is employed more in the vision of earth's workings—the wroth sea's waves . . . edged with foam, white as the bitten lip of hate', the 'uncouth pride' of 'strange groups of young volcanos' coming up 'cyclops-like, staring together with their eyes on flame', the spring wind passing 'like a dancing psaltress' over the wintry breast of earth—more in this vision than in the conception of God being at the heart of it all. Nevertheless, whether in one form or the other, the mystic dream is here and undeniable.

*Abt Vogler* shows that Browning was able to use the avenue of mystic approach to reality afforded by art. The poem falls into three parts. Stanzas I to V are unimportant, and do nothing but give, through floods of alliteration, metaphor and hyperbole, an onomatopoeic impression of organ-music. The final part of the poem is a statement of Browning's belief that the imperfections of this life will be put right in the next—'on earth the broken arcs; in heaven, the perfect round'. It is stanzas VI and VII that state, in brilliant terms, the mystic quality of music enunciated more simply long ago in *Pauline*:

*Music, which is earnest of a heaven,  
Seeing we know emotions strange by it  
Not else to be revealed.*

Here it is put in one of Browning's most remarkable figures:

*Here is the finger of God, a flash of the will that can,  
Existent behind all laws, that made them, and lo, they are!  
And I know not if, save in this, such gift be allowed to man,  
That out of three sounds he frame, not a fourth sound, but a star.*

He denies that this miracle can be effected in the other arts. Of painting I cannot speak, but there is no question that in certain kinds of (non-Browningian) verse precisely this thing happens. Let Logan Pearsall Smith say it (in one of the *Trivia*):

*But most of all I envy the octogenarian poet  
 who joined three words—  
     ‘Go, lovely rose’—  
 so happily together that he left his name to  
 float down through Time on the wings of a  
 phrase and a flower.*

Many people, lacking the larger mystic sense of God, are able to ‘divine the spiritual in the common things of life’ through the help afforded by music and poetry. The Abbé at his instrument did this and more, sliding by semitones till he found peace in the common chord and ‘the C major of this life’.

We have seen that in Sludge’s poetic outpourings Browning conveys his own sense of a strangeness, a deep inexplicableness, in phenomena; we have heard him in his own person, in *By the Fire-side*, speaking of a relation between himself and Elizabeth, and a relation between the powers of nature and humanity, in moments of tension, both which relations are unmistakably part of the ‘all-embracing spirit of the cosmos’. There is perhaps one other expression of the Christian aspect of this, in the otherwise negligible Epilogue to *Dramatis Personæ*. The poem of the ‘First Speaker’ gives the solid material belief in the Lord dwelling in the temple, that of the ‘Second Speaker’ the sceptic’s argument that Christ has been forgotten, belief in God is dead, and man is left as the highest of all beings. After these two wholly uninspired utterances, the third poem, giving Browning’s own feeling in the matter, is a completely prosy bit of sermonizing—‘Friends, I have listened to you, now listen to me. I tell you—’. Nevertheless the sermon is a sound one. Each individual is separate, and must find God in his own way. Browning feels that all nature conspires to speak to him of God; nature is God’s temple, and the universe—felt and known, alive and sentient—is the Face of God (or, as he said to Mrs Orr, of Christ). This is the mystic approach, but the thin texture of the mystic sense in him is shown by the dull and dreary terms in which he gives it vent. The true mystic, under the same compulsion, is inspired to rapturous hyperbole:

*The angels keep their ancient places—  
 Turn but a stone and start a wing . . .*

Mr Charles Morgan does not have to say anything explicitly at all: as



you read his novels you know you are in two worlds, two worlds that are one, a world in which you may at any moment step through the immaterial curtain and be absorbed by the diviner air of spiritual reality. This possibility trembles always on the verge of being with lyrical poetry; it approaches but rarely with Browning.

It is surprising that Browning, so much of whose quality is indicated by the word 'robust', came as near to mysticism as he did. He had not that in him which would often let him obey the precept, 'Be still and know that I am God'. But he was violently opposed to rationalism, and only mysticism can confront rationalism with assurance. I am not prepared to admit as handicaps his incomplete acquaintance with suffering and his appreciation of physical enjoyment. It is not true that the 'brightness of illumination' *must* be preceded by a 'dark night of purgation'. Browning's mystic illumination, such as it was, came out of happiness; his most intense suffering came afterwards. Nor is it 'necessary to treat the body as if it were a clog upon the soul's activities'. Given that training and discipline without which we cannot even play a game properly, flesh can, as the Rabbi said, 'help soul'. And it was well in accordance with Browning's way of thinking that he should have known the mystic experience in the sense given to it by Sir John Stuart Wallace,<sup>1</sup> 'the sacred meeting ground of all the faiths— and of modern science'.

## 3

I have seen the content of Browning's religious faith described as a 'home-made God'. The implications of the epithet were doubtless intended to be devastating, but little damage is done. In an artist's house one may find the walls partly covered with home-made pictures, which are not necessarily inferior to others also hanging there and coming from outside. A home-made pie is often better than a shop one. Every man's God, or religion, is either home-made or self-selected, and if selected not accepted unreservedly but with personal modifications. The mind which is strongly original or unorthodox will make so many modifications as may constitute a personal, 'home-made', religion, and Browning perhaps went to this length. We have noted how in *Christ-*

*mas-Eve and Easter-Day* he claimed 'my own Church', 'my own conviction', arrived at by 'the clue God gave me'.

It is 'natural theology' of this kind that he seems to be satirizing in *Caliban*, but once again he probably had no serious purpose of attacking people who chose to think for themselves. The 'theology' is so obviously that of a sub-human being that it is only at a few points that the satire glances at the ordinary self-opinionated fool to be met with in a later stage of evolution. Like *Childe Roland* the idea of the poem came from a single Shakespearian phrase—'my dam's God, Setebos', and Browning claimed to have done nothing more—or less—than to have conceived Caliban as he was before the coming of Prospero, and to have entered sympathetically into his mind, a mind which, in Shakespeare's showing, has an appreciation of beauty, can despise the folly of a drunkard, and feel a proper contempt for the evolutionary stage below himself—'apes with foreheads villinous low'. The sub-humanity is cleverly suggested by the impersonal way in which Caliban is now made to talk about himself, generally in the third person, without pronoun—

*Setebos, Setebes, and Setebos!*

*'Thinketh, He dwellth in the cold o' the moon*

--with an occasional lapse into the first person:

*'Saw a ball flame down late (yonder it lies)*

*Where, half an hour before, I slept in the shade:*

as if it is uncertain whether the speaker is the subject or object of thought. But on to Shakespeare's indications of budding thought-processes Browning has grafted a shoot from his own enquiring mind, and some of Caliban's speculations are original and intriguing.

Thus Caliban sees (though where, in his uninhabited island, is not apparent) that some of the creatures of Setebos are 'worthier' than their creator; yet they are in his power—must submit or be smashed (as a thing Caliban made would be if it claimed rights of its own). He glimpses an idea that Setebos may be the creation of a greater god—'the Quiet', living among the stars, as Setebos in the moon: he supposes that Setebos, envying the Quiet, has made the world to ape the inaccessible world of the Quiet, and will destroy it some day in like purposeless

fashion. Others of Caliban's speculations are caricatures of the anthropomorphic way in which silly people speak of 'the powers that be'. He notes, as a matter of observation, that good or harm is visited upon the creatures just as chance prompts the fancy of the creator. Setebos is terrible in his strength, irresponsible, unpredictable: he must be appeased, but an act which pleased him once may, repeated, move him to wrath, and it is always dangerous to appear too happy. But in general the caricature of the 'lay interpretation of God in man's image' is not close enough to suggest that Browning is doing more than enjoy himself imaginatively. Caliban roundly asserts that it was in a mood of listlessness or sport that Setebos made man, just as Caliban would, if he could, make a bird of clay, give it power to fly, and then torment or destroy it. And he hopes Setebos may some day change or forget—otherwise we must go on for ever as we are, in constant fear.

The picture does not seem to me to throw much light on Browning's own conception of God or on his opinion of anyone else's conception. But as a piece of creative verse the poem is superb, with its grotesque humour and life and its brilliantly successful evocation of the mind of a savage thinking the thoughts of a Browning.<sup>1</sup> The poet placed it among the four pieces by which he would wish to be represented.

I propose now to look at the principal ingredients in Browning's 'home-made' religion. According to the modern differentiation between deism and theism, one has to call him a deist, but God is to him a real and personal presence. But he does not accept God uncritically. Like David (and like Caliban), he speaks as he sees, and what he sees is that God's creation is a very imperfect thing. This is capable of two explanations, deficiency of power (or of wisdom, which is a kind of power) or deficiency of love. Browning has one glimpse, in *Rabbi Ben Ezra*, of the theory of power as yet incompletely developed:

*So, take and use thy work:  
Amend what flaws may lurk,  
What strain o' the stuff, what warpings past the aim!*

But he is not interested in evolutionary theories: he lets Furini, in the *Parleyings*, with whom he is clearly in sympathy, say he is no evolutionist, and give a satiric picture of evolutionary theory. Far from suspecting

<sup>1</sup> One of the few memorable and completely satisfying radio occasions in poetry was that of *Caliban upon Setebos* being read by Cecil Truncer.

a limit to the power of God he is deeply impressed by the power shown in the universe, and feels that the defects—from which arise man's sufferings—suggest an imperfection of love. This being inconceivable (or unacceptable), the incarnation of God and the sacrifice of Christ become a 'necessity of thought'. This is the theme of the religious part of *Saul*. Earlier, in *Pauline*, there was an expression of a sentimental feeling for the Man of Sorrows:

*Do I not feel a love which only ONE . . .  
 O thou pale form, so dimly seen, deep-eyed!  
 I have denied thee calmly—do I not  
 Pant when I . . . see thy calm pure truth out-flash  
 The brightest gleams of earth's philosophy? . . .  
 . . . of  
 Have I been keeping lonely watch with thee  
 , In the damp night by weeping Olivet.*

But by 1855 the antithesis of power and love was urgent with Browning, and he added the second more original part to *Saul*, the first having been a re-telling of the Old Testament episode of Saul and David. The second part, though not mystic in itself, is an imaginative re-creation of a mystical condition in David, a condition in which David mystically foresees what is now accepted as having come to pass, the birth and passion of Christ. Browning himself accepted it as the only way of restoring the balance between the power and the love of God.

Later the Pope argues it out again. Judge God by His works,

*Is there strength there?—enough: intelligence?  
 Ample: but goodness in a like degree?  
 Not to the human eye in the present state,  
 An isoscele deficient in the base.*

But he has already said that 'There is, beside Thy work, a tale of Thee', and now he brings this into play—

*. . . just the instance which this tale supplies  
 Of love without a limit*

—thus taking his stand on revelation, as Browning himself did not. But

however arrived at, the ultimate truth about God is his love: the loving worm diviner than a loveless God; 'love is victory, the prize itself', says Ferishtah, adding, 'I know nothing save that love I can boundlessly, endlessly'.

Having thus demonstrated a belief in Christ partly mystical and partly intellectual, Browning devoted a number of studies (some of which have been noticed) to the compelling thought of the impact of Christ on the contemporary world. *Cleon* is about immortality, but at its close the Greek poet, thinking despairfully that if this so desirable condition belonged to man Zeus would have revealed it to him, thinks also of two new prophets, Christ and Paul, who have been preaching a new truth inclusive of a new life to come. But these, he remembers doubtfully, are Jews, and their doctrines not to be accepted by sane men. Yet there they are—the seed has fallen to germinate where it can. After the pagan Greek feeling after immortality, comes the Arab physician, Karshish, conceiving the possibility of the incarnation through a meeting with Lazarus. The poem is one of Browning's most brilliant narratives, with much lyric infiltration and admirable verse-paragraphing. It is not so much the miracle that has impressed the physician (he thinks it may have been a natural recovery from a trance) as the way it has affected its subject. Lazarus is convinced he has been dead, and has been restored to life by a miraculous word from a Nazarene who was God incarnate. The very thought is blasphemy to the Arab, yet he is touched with awe, and his wonderings take the form of Browning's personal conviction:

*The very God! think, Abib! dost thou think?  
So, the All-Great were the All-Loving too —  
So through the thunder comes a human voice  
Saying, 'Oh heart I made, a heart beats here!'*

But the most direct and monumental defence of Christ was made in *A Death in the Desert*, prompted perhaps by the attacks on the fourth Gospel which were coming from Renan and others at the time, and built with great imaginative power on the tradition that St John died at Ephesus at an advanced age. The dramatic and narrative parts are executed with a graphic liveliness equal to anything that had preceded. The description of the parchment roll, 'supposed of Pamphylax the Antiochene', containing the narrative, and the picture of the dying

apostle in the cave tended by his three followers while 'the Bactrian convert kept watch', and the corresponding ending with the death—these and some other concrete passages are done with impressive skill. But the essence of the poem is the argument lying between the opening and the end, and presented as the last words of St John, concerning the necessity for belief in Christ. In contact with Christ or with those who saw him belief was easy, but when facts have become legends, belief will tend to fade like mist, unless we can feel Christ still with us. John—like Browning on so many occasions—sees evidences of power and love: power is the more obvious, but life 'is just our chance o' the prize of learning love'. The truth that God is love must be held against the world: Christ in God is 'the love that tops the might'. We cannot grasp spiritual truth with the certainty of material truth—as, say, the indubitable bliss of fire' (who, asked Blougram, 'believes God watches him continually as he believes in fire that it will burn?'). So doubts come to test mankind. John had forsaken Christ for fear of Romans and Jews: but the lapse had strengthened his faith and enabled him to bring faith to others. In the days to come, only belief in Christ will convince of the existence of God. Man will see force and law around him, but will not necessarily accept this as proof of God: even if he perceives love, the love may be explained as a reflection from his own capacity for love. And all these questions and doubts must be overcome without sight or miracle to help, if man is to grow in spirit. The deadly sin is not doubt but negation—to say there is no will behind the might and no love behind the will—i.e. no God, no Christ. God must be a God of love or man, who has love in his composition, would be greater than God (this is the 'loving worm' once more). But man has humility too, and knows he is not the lord of life. He stands between God and the beasts, alone capable of progress:

*God is, they are,  
Man partly is and wholly hopes to be;*

and error is midway to truth. Eventually man will reach 'the ultimate angels' law', indulging every instinct of the soul, 'there where law, life, joy, impulse are one thing'.

The whole poem is a sermon on the vital necessity for perceiving God in life and love in God, and the value of working this out by earnestly wrestling with the inevitable doubts. In the midst is inserted

an exquisitely worded series of propositions given as 'the glossa of Theotypas':

*This is the doctrine he was wont to teach,  
How divers persons witness in one man,  
Three souls which make up one soul: first, to wit,  
A soul of each and all the bodily parts,  
Seated therein, which works, and is what Does,  
And has the use of earth, and ends the man  
Downward: but, tending upward for advice,  
Grows into, and again is grown into  
By the next soul, which, seated in the brain,  
Useth the first with its collected use,  
And jeeleth, thinketh, willeth,—is what Knows:  
Which, duly tending upward in its turn,  
Grows into, and again is grown into  
By the last soul, that uses both the first,  
Subsisting whether they assist or no,  
And, constituting man's self, is what Is—  
And leans upon the former, makes it play,  
As that played off the first: and, tending up,  
Holds, is upheld by, God, and ends the man  
Upward in that dread point of intercourse,  
Nor needs a place, for it returns to Him:  
What Does, what Knows, what Is; three souls, one man.*

This interesting and picturesque but elementary visual analysis of the three functions of the self—body, mind and spirit, has to-day given way to a conception of the self as a spiritual unity with a material (because three-dimensional) aspect, but Browning's statement of the earlier idea remains as a brilliant piece of rhetoric.

Browning maintained his obsession with the incarnation till the end. The *Fancy* of Ferishtah called *The Sun* is intended as a demonstration of Christ as God made man. It consists of a roundabout and inconclusive argument leading up to the rebuke—If there are people who are convinced that God once took humanity upon him, it is not for those who cannot so believe to despise them, but rather to stand in awe at a conception beyond their grasp. And in one of the last of the *Asolando* poems he shows a Roman intellectual pondering the might of Cæsar and the

possibility of one being 'born in blind Judaea' to master both Cæsar and the universe.

Browning's belief in Christ appears to differ little from that of Mrs Orr, who complained that he was unorthodox. But she stood on safer ground, though ground which will not bear the weight of critical minds like his. His conclusion was soundly drawn from the premise that, lacking Christ, love is insufficiently represented in the world. But that premise is as much a matter of opinion as the authenticity of revelation, so that his position was no more logical than one based on an acceptance of the scriptures as the word of God. It was also a little uneasy—in constant need of restatement.

There is that matter of faith requiring frequent stimulation by doubt. Browning is not alone in being frightened of perfection. A white unquestioning faith, saintliness without a sign of sin—these conditions are commonly regarded as not only impossible but undesirable. 'The more of doubt the more of faith, I say', Blougram brightly maintains; but I suppose even he would not have said 'the more of sin the more of goodness'. Blougram is not one of Browning's mouthpieces, but this particular thought, in one form or another, comes so often that it may be taken as representing his mind. He would hardly have devised that wonderful picture of man's soul growing strong between God and the devil unless he had intended it to carry some weight. *Easter-Day* puts Blougram's thought differently:

*You must mix some uncertainty  
With faith if you would have faith be.*

The Pope looks forward to an age when 'the torpor of assurance' will be shaken from our creed, which will grow all the healthier for doubt and danger coming back. It was Miranda's weakness in *Red Cotton Night-cap Country* to have been bulwarked about by faith, so that he had lacked opportunity to batter doubt and attack half-knowledge: ignorance nullifies doubt as a drill is defeated by a feather-bed. St John in the desert expresses Browning's own idea that perfect and certain knowledge, free from doubt, would bring life as we know it to an end:

*truth once grasped . . .  
Why, man's probation would conclude, his earth  
Crumble.*



(Blake took a different view of doubt: 'If the sun or moon should doubt They'd immediately go out.')

That beautiful and touching poem, *Fears and Scruples*, presents the other side of doubt, showing a faith, not strong enough to resist the absence of proof, turning to fear. 'I waited for proof, which could have been so easily given, but it did not come, so I have lost faith—yet God may be there, in which case I suppose I shall be punished, though the losing of faith is not my fault but due to God's refusal to supply proof'. The temptation of rhyme led to a possibly unintended 'sensational' ending and a slip in the argument of the last two stanzas. What Browning intended to say was—to be punished for losing your faith when it was made so difficult for you to keep it would be monstrous treatment—and therefore, since the "friend" is God, who is no monster, the suggestion of punishment is out of the question'. But to complete his stanza XII, with its first two rhymes, he makes the reply come. 'it certainly looks like monstrous treatment, but we mustn't say things like that about God'—a feeble admission that the ways of God are inexplicable and unjustifiable.

But the general idea is that doubt is there to fortify faith—faith is the aim. Two of Ferishtah's fables urge that Providence should not be waited for but anticipated, since God works through man, and that faith can only be strong if it is based on love; while Miranda again is instructed that you cannot argue about the origin or reason of a faith, but you can test it by its results—'the offspring of a sickly faith must prove sickly act'. It was said of William Temple that he 'had never doubted the existence of God', and Browning never did except for a very brief period during his adolescence.

In almost the last poem in the *Asolando* volume (*Reverie*) Browning attempted for the last time to solve his problem of power and love. Here he leaves aside the answer which has previously satisfied him, that which says that love only drew level through the incarnation; instead he now sees the difference made up in an afterlife. 'On earth Power, though manifest, is not "full in play" but of limited action. Soul (or mind) surveying nature, sees that everything has been brought about by Omnipotence, yet in the world that results we see evil more abundant than good. But if we could follow out Power's intention to the end we should see that evil is only a cloud passing over good. Why does infinite Power allow good to be overcome by evil? We are ignorant of the nature of Power, but since it is infinite it could easily make the world

happy by abolishing change, chance and death, thus putting good on a level with evil. We must have faith that infinite Love does match infinite Power. In the poet's own life, as in the life of the world, power has been at strife with love, but he believes that in some future world this wrong will be righted. Only such faith can help us to bear the feeling—borne in upon us by indisputable fact—that Power is loveless. Life, to be tolerable, should be a pressing forward to heaven, where the adventurous soul may perhaps find continuing strife and storm, but where those who on earth aspired to the highest will find that Power is Love. Such is the poet's faith. He has always been aware of God's power, and life has taught him that if mankind's vision were clearer we should be equally aware of God's love. We shall know it some day, "when Power comes full in play". This, with its apparent recognition that the evils of life are due to limitations on God's power, falls (like the phrase in *Rabbi Ben Ezra*) into line with some modern views.

There was nothing metaphysical about his conception of an after-life, as hinted here and there in the poems. The little poem placed as prologue to *La Saisiaz* shows the soul, disencumbered of body, clapping its pinions and wandering at will day after day, but this is probably a pretty fancy prompted by the death of his friend. Ann Egerton-Smith. The 'fancy' takes an even more dubious shape in the body of the poem, where of death we read:

*Manfully man quits discomfort, makes for the provided room  
Where the old friends wait their fellow, where the new acquaintance wait,  
Probably for talk assembled, possibly to sup in state!*

On the other hand the materialism of *Prospice* is an inevitable consequence of agouized passion. The reunion is a physical one—'I shall clasp thee again'—but it is not easy to express reunion in non-physical terms without becoming ridiculous. The moral content of the after-life is given in *Apparent Failure*—a second chance for those who have failed here. But perhaps Browning's favourite idea—not devoid of logic—is that of *The Last Ride*: 'life's best', 'life's flower', 'life for ever old yet new, changed not in kind but in degree'. He was still thinking of it in this way, though under a more strenuous aspect, when he wrote the great *Epilogue*.

Browning insists constantly on the compensation that an after-life is to bring for the shortcomings of this one. At first both sides are allowed. Festus having said,

*It is our trust  
That there is yet another world to mend  
All error and mischance,*

Paracelsus asks (reasonably enough) why this world should be regarded as a makeshift, 'A mere foil to some fine life to come'. Later references are more one-sided. The ill-used patriot consoles himself in the thought that had he been 'paid by the world' he would have owed God something, but as things are he is 'safer' for 'God shall repay'. In similar terms Andrea del Sarto, feeling sore at his failure to impress the world, concludes that at the end God will compensate:

*'Tis safer for me, if the award be strict,  
That I am something underrated here;*

he even suggests that had he been *over-rated*, there would have been 'punishment'. The Grammarian gave up life and trusted death, assigning to God 'God's task to make the heavenly period perfect the earthen'; while Mrs Lee puts the 'doctrine, simple, ancient, true' in much the same way:

*Give earth yourself, go up for gain above.*

And as late as 1884 Browning follows the last and best of the *Fancies* with a lyric in which Ferishtah says the world gives little but hate as a reward for work; he for his part 'looked beyond the world for truth and beauty'.

The weakness of the compensation theory is, first, that it is built on the pusillanimous denial of life as good, and second, that it seems to represent God as having planned a bad world followed by a good one to atone for the first, which is uneconomic as well as inconsiderate.

With his strong emphasis on the love of God, Browning was bound to rule out eternal punishment—even punishment itself, perhaps. Ixion, that thoroughly bad lot, seems a doubtful hero for a parable, but he is deliberately chosen rather than a blameless Prometheus—a real sinner yet shown as greater than the god who dooms him to *eternal* punishment. The poem is a meditation of Ixion as he suffers on his wheel the relentless revenge of Zeus. He maintains that torment cannot possibly teach him, or Sisyphus, or Tantalus, anything, since they have already

realized their errors. Punishment of any sort is declared to be unjust, because their evil-doing was involuntary, due to their natures, as a tree that has grown crooked through obstruction. Flawless or faulty, they are the work of Zeus, and their repentance should have obviated punishment. But Ixion believes the triumph of hell will not endure; Zeus is not the true God—'Out of the wreck I rise—past Zeus to the Potency o'er him' (as even Caliban's religious brooding led him beyond Setebos to 'the Quiet'). Similarly Ferishtah : *Camel-Driver* seems to deny the doctrine of punishment for sin after death. Retrospective punishment is unreasonable and futile—the only valuable punishment is that which follows immediately on the offence, and the punishment is always there in the form of realization, which in itself is punishment. The lyric following repeats the argument that over-punishment would transfer the wrong to God: God's wrong would be greater than that of his victim—while the hardest thing to bear is unpunished sin (Plato's thesis in the *Gorgias*).

Immortality seems to be assumed and assured. Browning gives us two full studies, one Greek and one Christian. *Cleon*, one of the *Men and Women*, is a masterly performance. It begins with an exquisite scrap of lyric and a fine verse paragraph, and carries on its meditation in blank verse of the best. Cleon believes in the progress of the race: his own combination of many arts, for instance, is an improvement on the single arts in which artists have hitherto excelled—an advance from simple to complex. But progress has been in material things—the soul of man gives no appearance of development. In particular there seems no approach to immortality, other than the form in which artists know it, by reason of their work continuing to live after their own death. An advance came when the life of animals, perfect in itself, received the gift of self-consciousness—sense becoming 'the sense of sense'. But this did not bring an increase in happiness; on the contrary, men now first knew failure, for the soul realized the vast realm of joy into which it could not enter: 'life's inadequate to joy'. And the main reason for this is that as the soul's capacity for comprehending joy grows, 'physical recipiency' decreases, a horror only exceeded by the horror of death, when all capability of sensation and joy vanish. The dread of this thought makes Cleon dream of an after-life in which the limitless desire for joy will be matched by an infinite capability for joy—in which, as del Sarto would have said, a man's grasp will equal his reach—a state into which we should be freed by 'the throbbing impulse of death'. But

such a state, which would be immortality, is not to be conceived—even though the Jewish prophets, Christus and Paulus, are said to include it among their doctrines.

Browning and Shaw are poles apart, but it was this loss of 'physical recipiency'—stated in terms of mind rather than of joy—that so impressed Shaw that he invented his fable of the Long-livers to overcome the problem. The mood of Browning's poem is unnecessarily depressed: I do not know why either the Greek poet in his lily-isle or Browning, recently married and at the age of forty-three (Shaw had the excuse of being sixty-three when he wrote *Back to Methuselah*), should have been cast down by, or even have known anything about, this decreased recipiency for joy. However, in so far as a limitation is felt, the idea that it will be released in death is sounder and more acceptable than the one of compensation, and the realization that the next stage in evolution—in the progress of the soul—is likely to be the acquisition of the mastery of time is a brilliant anticipation of modern philosophy.

The most complete document on immortality is *La Saisiaz*, written twenty-three years after *Cleon*, when Browning was sixty-six and had been seventeen years widowed. Its occasion was the sudden death of his beloved friend, Ann Egerton-Smith, at the house La Saisiaz near Geneva at which she had been staying with Browning and his sister in the autumn of 1877. The shock and grief turned him back to questions which had seemed satisfactorily settled in the poems of *Men and Women* and *Dramatis Personæ*, and in the Prologue and Epilogue to *Fifine*.

The form of *La Saisiaz* is the *Locksley Hall* line used as metrical prose: the reflective purpose of the poem demanded nothing more. After an opening consisting of pleasant reminiscences of his friend leading up to the sudden question, 'Here I stand: but you—where?' he propounds the two questions 'whereat I can but guess—Does the soul survive the body? is there God's self, no or yes?' Two points are 'pre-supposed'—there is something that knows, something that is known: 'Call this—God, then; call that—soul: and both the only facts for me.' (Surely the second of the foregoing questions is answered here.) The question of survival is a matter of argument, and the argument is, again, shortly, that this imperfect life requires a better one to follow and redress the balance. The logic of this depends on agreement that life on earth is bad enough to demand compensation. Browning is repetitive about this: 'Life thus owned unhappy'; 'Yon worm, man's fellow-creature, on yon happier world, its leaf'; and, above all,

*I must say, or choke in silence, 'Howsoever came my fate,  
Sorrow did and joy did nowise—life well-weighed—ponderate*

As to this, I would have preferred him to choke; the judgment seems to me mean-spirited in tone and monstrous as a statement of fact. Messrs de Vane and Knickerbocker, who probably know as much about Browning's life as anyone, say in the introduction to their *New Letters of Robert Browning* that 'his life was mainly a fortunate and happy one', but that he had 'his fair share of suffering'—a summing-up that does not justify the querulous outburst quoted, especially when the elements of this fair share are enumerated: (1) the misunderstanding of the critics, (2) the long delay of recognition, (3) the sense of failure (all these have been patiently endured by most original writers), (4) financial anxieties (slight, and certainly without effect on his happiness), (5) the precarious health of his wife and her early death (foam on the ocean of happiness that came from the marriage), (6) the loneliness of the following years (he had his memories and hopes), (7) the deepening disappointment in the character and career of his much-loved son (there is little evidence that Pen gave his father anything but pleasure and satisfaction except for a year or two at Oxford). No, the pronouncement was unworthy of Browning, and Elizabeth might have found it hard to forgive, but of course it is balanced by more courageous utterances.

The poem has a second part in which Fancy or intuition places before Reason certain fresh ideas from which Browning draws the consequences, principally that under a scheme of rewards and punishments in the after-life virtue would lose its virtue, and man would no longer be able to look on life as probation—'Liberty of doing evil gave his doing good a grace'; secondly that hope of immortality is better than certainty, which would fundamentally change life. He returns to his starting-point by declaring of Voltaire that he too 'at least believed in soul, was very sure of God'.<sup>1</sup>

*La Saisiaz* has been called Browning's *In Memoriam*, but apart from its occasion there are few elements of likeness between this set religious exercise out of Browning's declining years and the great elegy that drew strength from Tennyson's genius at its height. *In Memoriam* does not need to argue a case. The profound and lyrical grief rests on a basis

<sup>1</sup> A writer in *The Times Literary Supplement* has spoken of Browning's 'belief in God' being 'founded mainly on the incompleteness of life on earth, fulfilled hereafter'. Surely it was not his 'belief in God' that was so founded.

of assured faith only momentarily disturbed by doubt that has as much beauty as poignancy. The twin themes of love and religion interweave and reinforce each other, while with Browning the slighter love merely sets the religious brooding in motion. Only a Browning devotee could draw from *La Saisiaz* either the consolation or the æsthetic delight that *In Memoriam* has brought to readers of all creeds and all varieties of literary culture.

One must not take seriously the idea of reincarnation which Browning plays with here and there. Paracelsus is tempted to explain on some such theory the clearness of his vision:

*At times I almost dream  
I too have spent a life the sage's way  
And tread once more familiar paths. Perchance  
I perished in an arrogant self-reliance  
Ages ago; and in that act a prayer  
For one more chance went up . . .*

But he puts this aside as foolish. In *Evelyn Hope* it is stated with finality:

*Delayed it may be for more lives yet,  
Through worlds I shall traverse not a few;  
Much is to learn, much to forget,  
Ere the time be come for taking you. . . .  
In the new life come in the old one's stead.  
I have lived (I shall say) so much since then,  
Given up myself so many times,  
Gained me the gains of various men,  
Ransacked the ages, spoiled the climes . . .*

But this is doubtless to be read as a 'dramatic' utterance. So too, I should have thought, are the lines in *Cristina*, where the queen is said to have 'felt clearly'

*Åges past the soul existed,  
Here an age 'tis resting merely,*

though Inge (with a mention of this poem) suggested that 'a doctrine of pre-existence in some form not easy to grasp, is a more serious part of

Browning's teaching than Wordsworth's'. *Old Pictures in Florence* is more obviously personal, and here the conception is put tentatively, and indeed denied.

*There's a fancy some lean to and others hate—  
That, when this life is ended, begins  
New work for the soul in a vother state,  
Where it strives and gets weary, loses and wins: . . .  
Through life after life in unlimited series;  
Only the scale's to be changed, that's all.*

*Yet I hardly know. When a soul has seen  
By the means of Evil that Good is best, . . .  
Why, the child grown man, you burn the rod,  
The uses of labour are surely done;  
There remaineth a rest for the people of God:  
And I have had troubles enough, for one.*

And then again the enervation of the last three lines is utterly contradicted by the vigour of his ultimate hope—no lying low in sleep, but 'the bustle of man's worktime', with the poet unseen but active as ever, striving and thriving there as here.

For this life, Browning's most obsessive notion of it is as probation for the next. *East-Is-Day* says the probation lies in having to choose between the earthly and the heavenly. *La Saisiaz* says the quality of probation dies once the choice is associated with reward or punishment. The word occurs over and over again, and the thought in many other places, as when Norbert says, 'I count life just a stuff to try the soul's strength on, educe the man'. It runs right through Browning (dating from 1835, while his theory of compensation does not crop up till 1855), and once it has been distinguished from salvationism, which Browning expressly disavows, it is as good a way of looking at life as any. Sometimes he seems to mean by probation nothing more than the ability to endure, but the general impression he gives is that he regards this life as a discipline, as an opportunity to show one's quality, to live in such a way as to fit oneself for the exigent demands of immortality. There is no suggestion that it is a mere matter of being good or avoiding sin. Ferishtah's fable, *Plot-Culture*, indicates a view of sin which harmonizes with the larger theory: acts are not to be judged solely as right or



wrong, but as being sound or unsound moral fruit; God accepts the totality of a life, though some of its details may have been a doubtful righteousness. 'Taste is the only morality', said Ruskin, and the good life is to love beauty and virtue, and to have followed them as far as you have been able because you have loved them.

Of Browning's coming to accept the 'great and glorious doctrine' (as Chesterton called it) of original sin I have already said something in Part I. To find any satisfaction in the doctrine seems to me like being glad to find you have been landed with a hereditary disease, but the idea is reasonable enough provided it goes hand in hand with a more creative belief in original goodness. The satirical stanza which precedes this one in that detestable poem, *Gold Hair*, indicts Browning of an unintelligent lack of tolerance. Bishop Colenso and the writers of the *Essays and Reviews*, at whom he appears to be tilting, were proposing nothing more than what had always been his own line—essential Christianity with independence of thought. In spite of an occasional denial, throughout life and poetry Browning shows the courage of a personal faith, and I cannot allow that Santayana had any right to call his religion 'truncated': neither firm base nor aspiring point was missing. He saw the love of God as a guiding principle of creation, and it is only to be regretted that his failure to appreciate the nature of God's power prevented his poetry from being what he declared Shelley's poetry to be—'a sublime fragmentary essay, (and in Browning's case it would not have been fragmentary) towards a presentment of the correspondence of the universe to Deity'.

## 4

When we pass from Browning's religious outlook to his general philosophy of life we find ourselves on more open ground. The framework of his religion was given: he could do nothing but reject, add, modify. He may have imagined he was thinking things out from first principles, but few men who have had a religious upbringing are capable of doing that. In constructing a philosophy of life he could afford to be more original, and indeed his philosophy was less a construction than an expression of his personality, the more so because he was not an intellectual. He called upon his intellectual faculties more freely than most poets of his calibre have done, but he rightly distrusted reason, knowing that (except where intellect rises to the height of

genius) it cannot travel even half-way to the goal of truth. He gives the appearance of being intellectual through his success in handling intellectual types: he has, as Elizabeth said, 'authority over reason and the passions': but he was most a poet when employing the other side of the combination she noticed, his 'variety of the plastic power'—formative, not analytic. All his best poetry derives from an imaginative restlessness. He felt the inadequateness, the passing relevance, of scientific knowledge, and was not disturbed by contemporary scientific theories as Tennyson and most good Victorians were. It would seem that he had that quality which Keats found pre-eminently in Shakespeare, '*negative capability*, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason'. An ounce of intuition was worth more to Browning than a pound of experiment and logical inference. His own intuitions, in the way of general outlook, were, as L. P. Jacks says intuition should be, 'an apprehension of the whole man': in religious matters they tended too often to be nothing more than fixed ideas. He was, at least in all but later days, prepared to dream, to let truth flower from his spirit. He was not afraid of illusions.<sup>1</sup> In short, Browning's philosophy is no set professional synthesis, but the immediate product of a series of recurrent insights into life. His poems are his philosophy (which ought to, but unfortunately will not, bring this chapter to a close).

Abstract is the last word to be applied to his philosophy. His theories are not metaphysical, but arise out of temperament and deal with human problems. Humanity was his meat and drink. Being accused of not loving nature he replied, 'Yes, I do, but I love human nature more'. Earlier, in 1845, he had been oddly described by a reviewer as being 'without any sympathy for a human being', and had commented to Elizabeth—'then, for newts and efts at all events'. But he does not generally attempt to legislate: he poses situations rather than resolves them. (The most obvious exception is *The Statue and the Bust*, where the openly expressed moral judgment was probably a piece of spontaneous self-justification in the matter of the 'crime' of his elopement.) In other words he believed that the world—seen through the soul not through the intellect—is made for each of us. And it is a world where spirit and body both play their parts, equally living and divine: he would not

<sup>1</sup> 'Eliza Westbrook . . . had no illusions. That is to say she had a false idea of everything between heaven and hell.' This witty observation is from Mr Richard Church's brilliant little book on *Mary Shelley*.

have subscribed Tennyson's purpose of 'working out the brute', but desired man to maintain both flesh and soul in purity.

His values were far from absolute, but they were not contemporary. Avoiding the materialism of the nineteenth century, he was free from the scepticism of the eighteenth, and would have been aghast at the indifferentism of the twentieth. When his work at last began to penetrate, it was among the young that his influence was first felt. In 1865 he noted with pleasure that there was a great increase in the sales of his books at Oxford and Cambridge. He had an intuitive understanding of the evolution of life, and might have accepted the metaphysical development which was part of Aristotle's scheme, but he was not impressed by the biological theories of Lamarck and Darwin; it was what followed evolution that interested him—not the past but the present and the future, especially the celestially remote future. Holding no dogmatic religion, he could afford to ignore the new dogmas of science. Yet he would, I fancy, have listened at least with interest to Dr Julian Huxley surmising that the apparent general direction of evolution almost proves the operation of Deity, though its erratic process suggests a God with incomplete powers.

Of a still newer science Browning was happily quite ignorant, and sublimely unaware that critics would one day be called upon to use it to measure him by. I refer to modern psychology, and if there is any such call I must let it go unheard. There may be poets in whom genius has the appearance of being a pathological symptom, and psychology might be expected to have something interesting to say about them, but I do not think it has any bearing on completely sane and healthy poetry such as that of Wordsworth, Tennyson and Browning. I was pleased to find Professor Leone Vivante (in *English Poetry*) denying that poetry can be 'explained through the unconscious'. I should think not indeed. The place of origin of the poetic vision is strange, remote, occult, but it cannot be the unconscious if that region is as dark, dismal and malodorous as it is said by the psychologists to be. Professor Vivante pleasantly adds that Shakespeare is 'the strongest bulwark against modern psychology', and if Shakespeare wants support in that task he will get plenty from Browning.

To come to our scene of operations, the poems where substance, method and purpose are philosophic. One of Browning's deepest and earliest philosophic convictions was of the importance of philosophy. That at least is the simplest explanation of his having spent most of his

time between the ages of twenty-one and thirty—a time when Spenser was writing the *Shepherd's Calendar*, Milton *L'Allegro* and *Comus*, and Tennyson *The Lady of Shalott*, *Oenone* and *The Lotos Eaters*—on two very long and very learned poems with aims almost entirely didactic. Concerning *Paracelsus* he said he thought 'the drift and scope' were 'awfully radical'; and he told Dowden the whole of *Sordello*—that 'study in the development of a soul'—was intended to be an example of a certain way of life which he considered fallacious. This unpoetic view of the poet's task was abandoned in 1841 and did not fully reappear (save for *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day*) till 1871. But there was always in Browning a certain preoccupation with good at the expense of beauty. There is a line in the poem *Before*, which says of the peccant duellist that as life passes 'he 'gins to guess the purpose of a garden', which seems (according to the context) to mean that the world is a place of testing rather than of delight—a conception belonging to morals and religion rather than to poetry.

However, the attitude gave us two of his most famous poems, both approximating to spiritual autobiography and one a glorious piece of work, though I think the other is a failure. Both are founded on the lives of historical personages, but in *Paracelsus* the historical background is unobtrusive. The five parts of the poem are hung upon five dates in the life of Paracelsus, covering a period of twenty-nine years; and the whole presents a fine dramatic picture of a soul, analytical and self-confident, struggling up through experience and error, with the help of two friends and a chance-met poet, to an understanding of God and his creation.

In Part I, Paracelsus being about twenty-two, he declares his intention of setting out with 'God's great commission' to acquire knowledge, since through knowledge he can serve mankind—whom he nevertheless professes to scorn. His friends, Festus and Michal, husband and wife, protest that without love he cannot serve mankind, but Paracelsus persuades them that if he achieves knowledge, praise and love will follow, so he sets out hopefully. Nine years later, in Part II, Paracelsus has achieved fame and power through knowledge, but he is weary, unhappy and aged (like the Grammarian, who also 'decided not to Live but Know'). He has cast out love and beauty, his conclusion at this point being, 'God! Thou art Mind!' Then he meets Aprile the poet, a being the exact opposite of Paracelsus. His desire is 'to love infinitely and be loved'. He would create a world of beauty for the good of man

out of sculpture, painting, architecture, poetry, music. He is crazed and ill with failure, and insists on seeing Paracelsus as a great poet who has brought happiness to the world through love. This overcomes Paracelsus, who realizes he has after all not 'attained': he determines to learn to love and to live in the spirit of Aprile (who is doubtless drawn from Shelley). Having done his work of awakening Paracelsus, Aprile dies—fading out like the Fool in *Lear*.

Five years pass, and Paracelsus is a University Professor, acclaimed by the people. But he still feels he has failed. It is not only that his aspirations have ended in popularity and a small professorship, and that he is still unhappy: he knows he has become a machine for discovering truth, and can do nothing but go on in the sterile course. He had made some effort to follow Aprile, but his warped nature stood in the way. Knowledge is still his aim, and he thinks he has done something to advance the cause of knowledge, though the vast shadowy inclusive truth he had dreamed of eludes him. But one thing he has learnt: though God is still mind, humanity is made of 'love, hope, fear, faith'. As the fine close intellectual argument draws to a conclusion we meet again one of those beautiful descriptive passages which come now and then to brighten a progress which is everything except poetical:

*Hark! 'Tis the melancholy wind astir  
Within the trees; the embers too are grey:  
Morn must be near.*

*Best ope the casement: see,  
The night, late strewn with clouds and flying stars,  
Is blank and motionless: how peaceful sleep  
The tree-tops altogether! Like an asp  
The wind slips whispering from bough to bough*

(one of Browning's rare instances of Tennysonian onomatopoeia.)

Part IV carries us on only two years. Paracelsus's spiritual position is little advanced, and he has been dismissed from his chair at Basil, with the consequence that his earlier contempt for mankind intensifies to hate. He plans to start again in his quest for knowledge, abandoning all pretence of asceticism and enjoying sensual pleasures as he goes. He is part poet, and though he has forgotten Aprile's gospel of love, he makes his songs in emulation of the dead poet. (One of his songs, 'Over the sea our galleys went', is a parable to show he realizes his efforts have been

in the wrong direction—but it is too late to change now.) He sinks to his nadir in this episode; even mind, which was once his supreme conception, is now called disease, the natural state of health being ignorance. Perhaps he had to pass through this stage on the way to a truer vision. Festus, who at all times is plain common-sense against Paracelsus's mad genius, blames him for losing trust in God's plan as soon as his own plans go wrong. Finding him cynically impervious to advice and censure, Festus stabs him awake by telling him Michal is dead. He is stirred to sudden feeling, though to what purpose is not clear, and declares he has discovered for himself that the soul is immortal.

And so we come to the close of this 'aspiring' and tempestuous life. Thirteen years after the events of Part IV we find Paracelsus, again rejected by the people he has desired to serve in his own way, lying in a stupor, watched over by the faithful Festus. Festus is much more than common-sense: he is the sane but elevated spirit, the genuinely religious man, content with the love of God, while Paracelsus is one who must do great things to the glory of God, and forget God in the doing, dazzled by self. It is Festus who now counters Paracelsus's early assertion, 'God, thou art *Mind*', with his own, 'God! Thou art love! I build my faith on that'. Paracelsus awakes but does not recognize Festus. He lies there raving of Aprile and Michal—poetry and 'sweet human love'. The two ideas of knowing and loving are balancing in his mind: he asks if Aprile 'Knows as he Loves—if I shall Love and Know'. In his delirium he raves like Lear, declaring he will 'exterminate the race', and crying that if there is not another life to come this one is 'a poor cheat, a stupid bungle, a wretched failure', to be hurled back in the face of God: the pitiful complaint of a man who has taken his headstrong way and come to disaster.

At last clearness returns. He recognizes Festus, and knows he is dying. While waiting to enter on the new life he thinks about the past and begins to fulfil his 'last mission'—to pronounce his final philosophy—'God speaks to men through me'. Browning attached great faith to the inspiration of death-bed utterances; and one certainly supposes that Paracelsus's dying speech, which is the aim and object of the poem, gives something of Browning's views at the time, though it is rather much to say that it contains the whole of his philosophy of life. It is much above the rest of the poem in style and imaginative power.

'I vowed myself to the service of man, and was happy. In spite of some human doubts, I felt I knew God and the nature of His being,

especially His infinite joy in creation and the life of the world. I saw how God had made creation lead up to man, a creature endowed with faculties of power, knowledge and love. Thus one stage of being was accomplished. But creation is still at that stage. Man has next to march, and he has not yet begun—" . . . progress is the law of life, man is not Man as yet". At present only a few individuals here and there are great: it is only when all men are perfected, "equal in new-blown powers", that man will be even in the infancy of his next stage, which may be foreseen in a few super-human souls. The "long triumphant march" to this state may be called the "tendency to man", the perfect man; when this has been achieved a new movement will begin: "in completed man begins anew a tendency to God." Already in a few men even this process may be seen at work—men too great

*For narrow creeds of right and wrong which fade  
Before the unmeasured thirst for good; while peace  
Rises within them ever more and more.'*

(This original and imaginative vision of something not unlike Creative Evolution—the only form of evolutionary theory I find worthy of acceptance—is of the greatest importance, and astonishing in view of the fact that science was, before 1833, silent on the subject except for the vaguely suggestive propositions of the Lamarckians. The *Origin of Species* did not appear for another quarter of a century, and it was not till 1887 that Browning expressed, in a *Parleying* with Francis Furini, his disapproval of Darwin's mechanical system, with man as the crown of creation.)

The oration proceeds, 'I, Paracelsus, was one of the great ones, but I loved power too much; I lacked hope and fear and love; so I failed and fell into despair. Then came Aprile, to show me the place of love in the order of things:

*love preceding  
Power, and with much power, always more love.*

But though I knew this now, "in my own heart love had not been made wise", and I did not understand that men's faults were necessary to their virtues, that hate was a beginning of love and weakness an aspiring to goodness. Aprile "loved too rashly", I was over-proud. Let men regard

us both and bring forth a better-tempered spirit combined of "the radiant star and the cold dark orb". It might be suggested that Festus, with Michal, represents the combination Paracelsus has in mind.

It will be noticed that the opposition of love and power does not yet appear. Here the question is between love and *mind*. This is less fundamental, since God must be mind, and mind must have power. Raymond says that in his dying speech Paracelsus arrives at a Christian conception of love—"not a romantic passion for an ideal of absolute beauty, but a divine condescension to human imperfection". The view of the necessity of sin is controversial (Jesus said, 'Be ye perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect'), and I do not find the conception of love in Book V superior to that in Book II. I am inclined to attach greater importance to the far more original and imaginative presentation of the Creative Evolutionary process, which has a power, an inspiration, a vision that did not come again to Browning till another twenty years had passed.

If there was ever inspiration behind *Sordello* it got lost. Possibly lost in time. Browning was a fast writer, but he laboured at *Sordello* for seven years, and it was afterwards much recast and rewritten. The powerful intellect of the young Browning sustains the poem, as Atlas sustained the sky, but to hold up is not to create. Truth lies properly at the bottom of a well, and to fetch it up one swims down, down through the most beautiful of the elements. Browning placed the truth of *Sordello* at the bottom of a coal-mine, and then filled the mine up with coal and rubble, making necessary a rescue-party with pick, shovel and explosive. The stuff that has to be painfully removed is the 'historical background'. The nuggets of truth, found here and there about the mine, are shining and malleable: the notorious 'obscurity' of this poem lies almost entirely in the huge, hard, compressed mass of narrative. All Browning's other long narratives are readable on the run, or at least at a ruminative walk, but in *Sordello* the narrative is of jungle impenetrability. A principal cause of obscurity is the garrulousness that begins in *Sordello* and was never entirely given up—the endless sentence and the plain statement ramified in bewildering detail. Dowden, making (like Wordsworth) what I suppose to be his solitary joke, declared *Sordello* to be 'a model of lucidity'. Gosse came nearer to the fact when he said it was 'clear enough at the third reading': even so the third reading, to be efficacious, entails a closeness of application which rules out the pleasure normally associated with poetry. Fortunately the historical background is unimportant. Its function is to hide with the clang of battle and the



dust of empires that story of Sordello's soul Browning was so anxious we should hear told; and its main relevance is that it places Sordello, other than as a thirteenth-century poet mentioned and admired by Dante, as the son of a soldier of high position on the Ghibelline side in the wars of Empire and Papacy—Taurello Salanguerra, general to the Emperor Friedrich.

Besides nuggets of golden truth there are many buried diamonds of descriptive poetry, and the fine opening of the poem is typical of what is to follow:

. . . *I single out*  
*Sordello, compassed murkily about*  
*With ravage of six long sad hundred years.*  
*Only believe me. Ye believe?*  
*Appears*  
*Verona . . .*

But Verona does not appear. Our expectations, thus brilliantly aroused, are dashed by an irrelevant argumentary passage of fifty lines, at the end of which we have again:

*Then, appear*  
*Veronal . . .*

But not yet. A dozen lines on Shelley, Æschylus, Sidney are interposed before we really get magnificently to work on the scene:

*Lo, the past is hurled*  
*In twain: up-thrust, out-staggering on the world.*  
*Subsiding into shape, a darkness rears*  
*Its outline, kindling at the core, appears*  
*Verona. . . . That Autumn eve was stilled:*  
*A last remains of sunset dimly burned*  
*O'er the far forests, like a torch-flame turned*  
*By the wind back upon its bearer's hand*  
*In one long flare of crimson.*

The innumerable descriptive passages often achieve that high level, and it must have been these that attracted Rossetti and (later) Swinburne, who were among the poem's few contemporary admirers.

We gather that, some years before the point at which we are to take up Sordello's story, he had been living, 'a slender boy in a loose page's dress', at the castle of Goito. He is 'a soul fit to receive delight at every sense', but an introvert, and with an overweening notion of his powers as a poet. He feels that by imagination he can stand on earth's faint suggestion and thence soar to heaven, 'equal to being all'. In this youthful period he lives in solitary imaginings, a spider weaving webs, 'selfish enough, without a moral sense'. He dreams of greatness, and eventually fancies upon himself the mantle of Apollo. A victory over another poet, Eglamour, sets him thinking about poetry, its kinds, its difficulties. He wonders whether the source of difficulty lies with the body, the mind or the audience:

*The Body, the Machine for Acting Will,  
Had been at the commencement proved unfit;  
That for Demonstrating, Reflecting it,  
Mankind — no fitter: was the Will itself  
In fault?*

('Will' seems to mean imagination.)

Sordello wanders about, observing men and nature, receptive in a Wordsworthian way. He learns, through an earth disturbance, how much more creative is nature than the human mind—one natural object gone can be replaced by another, but the past for man can never be redressed: we lack nature's magnificent resources. He feels he has wasted the years: he has aimed at happiness but refused the means. Happiness consists in feeding Being by experience, but Being includes body as well as soul, and he has so far used only half his talents. He sees that 'a soul . . . is insufficient to its own delight': action is required; he will lead men, and to this end becomes a soldier. At the end of Book III, half-way through the poem, Browning is still saying, 'You shall hear Sordello's story told'.

Book IV is almost all history. Sordello, now in the service of Taurello Salinguerra (his father, though neither is aware of the fact), plans to impress mankind with his will, make mankind the body which his soul shall inspire. But first he must bring about some form of democracy. He sees too there is some cause bigger than that of either Guelph or Ghibelline: he personalizes it as Rome, the ancient unity of the world. But Rome itself must be made anew in democratic shape, and he

realizes that this, a new humanity, the last and loveliest of his dreams, will take another age to build: the beautiful dream is beyond his power. Then he remembers that it is enough for man to take the first step, leaving the completion of the work to God or the future; so he will begin by helping the Guefts, the Papal party, through his persuasive powers over Salinguerra, the Emperor's general. He goes to Salinguerra and makes a long speech on the text of invoking knowledge (represented by the Pope) for the control of strength (the Emperor), strength by itself having failed. (At one point, when Sordello is proposing to 'unveil the last of mysteries' to the world, Browning comically comments, "That is, he writes *Sordello!*") With Salinguerra is Palma, daughter of the Emperor's deputy, and he asks her if he ought to listen to Sordello, take the Gueft side, submit his 'strength' to the Pope's 'knowledge':

*fill the scope*  
O' the Church, thus based on All, by All, for All

(this was twenty-five years before Gettysburg!)

Palma, who is in love with Sordello, now reveals to the two men their relationship, and Taurello (with signs of well-repressed emotion) begins to plan a victorious march—but *against* the Pope—with his newly-found son. Sordello, offered the Emperor's badge, sinks into deep thought, and the others leave him to himself.

Sordello stands watching the sunset, and then (like Paracelsus) turns to consider his past life. It has lacked clear purpose; the sea of his being has lain inert, unmoved by beauty, intellect, ideals, love, or even hate, any of which can provide a force to raise life as the moon lifts the sea. He has not even won to complete self-realization, to an inner law. His desire to serve the people has not borne fruit. He thinks of his plan to join the Pope and oppose the Emperor, but remembers there is good and bad on both sides, everywhere. He feels a desire for joy, here and now, without waiting for a future life, yet if he could be convinced of the after-life as the sages, champions and martyrs were, he would relinquish life.

Striving to penetrate reality, he feels his 'flesh-half' dissolve, and by spiritual vision he sees how life, with its mixture of good and evil, is a mode of time and space, Time being without force to bind Eternity or Matter to bind Mind. In a life where Eternal Mind is supreme, good and

evil will be separate and distinct. He feels himself out of time, and sees that his error has been, instead of proportioning soul to matter, to attempt to 'sublime matter beyond the scheme'; the right course would be to 'fit to the finite his infinity', so that soul matches body as the sky mirrors itself in the sea. The soul's true course is 'dictated by love, yet, though Sordello has loved widely, he has failed in his purpose of saving the people. Browning concludes for him by saying his need was to love God and especially to know God through his human revelation in Christ.

*Ah my Sordello, I this once befriend  
And speak for you. Of a power above you still  
Which, utterly incomprehensible,  
Is out of rivalry, which thus you can  
Love, tho' unloving all conceived by man—  
What need! And of—none the minutest duct  
To that out-nature, naught that would instruct  
And so let rivalry begin to live—  
But of a Power its representative  
Who, being for authority the same,  
Communication different, should claim  
A course, the first chose but this last revealed—  
This Human clear, as that Divine concealed—  
What utter need!*

(I suppose Dowden would call this 'lucid', but it is only after several readings that I venture on a paraphrase:

There is great need of God—an incomprehensible power, exhibiting no human love, and only lovable because so completely different from man; there is no means of human contact with this power, and therefore there is the greater need, utter need, of another Power, representing the first, and just as much 'God', but nearer to humanity, and executing a purpose chosen by God in a way understandable by mankind.)

Torn by his indecision, Sordello dies, and the internecine wars which he had hoped to end go on.

Although Book VI comprises, as it were, the dying thoughts of

Sordello, it does not expound the idea of the poem as definitely as Paracelsus's dying speech. The central idea is found in three passages, the first and most important being in Book I, where, after Sordello's quality of mind has been described, the poem goes on to say that such a mind may do wonders if it is not 'enervated' by (a) thinking mankind not worth serving, or (b) worse still, trying its powers beyond the possibilities, desiring

*to display completely here  
The mastery another life should learn,  
Thrusting in time eternity's concern.*

Browning told Furnivall that this last description was the one which applied to Sordello, and that the whole of the rest of the poem was an example of its result. Since Sordello's life ended in failure it would seem that Browning intended to show this as a false aim. But it only became so when Sordello abandoned poetry for political leadership. 'Eternity's concern' may be alien to the soldier, the lawyer or the stockbroker, but it is surely the very business of the poet.

In Book III again Browning tells his 'English Eye-bright' (Euphrasia Haworth) that the purport of the poem is to show the fate of such (Sordello) as find our common nature too restricted, and so 'leap from the allotted world', 'floundering on . . . a god's germ, doomed to remain a germ'. But surely, again, neither Sordello nor anyone else can hope to be more than a god's germ. The diagnosis of Book I is repeated in Book VI, where Sordello was censured for trying to 'sublime matter beyond the scheme', once more a malady most incident to poets.

*Paracelsus* and *Sordello* are parallel studies in failure, and if it is bad that a happy and healthy young poet should occupy himself with philosophy it is sadder still that he should be deeply concerned with failure. Paracelsus failed because he learnt too late the gospel of love, Sordello ostensibly because he flew his kite too high but really because he did not stick to his last. What they both lacked and badly needed was humility, a spiritual factor that made its exquisite first appearance in the next poem, *Pippa Passes*, and shone out at intervals until it achieved its apotheosis in the three beautiful figures of *The Ring and the Book*, *Pompeii*, *Caponsacchi* and the Pope.

The poem *Sordello* is the embodiment of an only half-satisfactory personality and the expression of a quite inadequate philosophy: I

cannot think that the painful process of unearthing has been in itself worth while, though it has enabled us to glimpse or handle many beauties by the way.

## 5

The foregoing surveys of *Paracelsus* and *Sordello* were not quite complete, since I omitted reference to certain passages on good and evil as being more usefully comprised under the present section. Browning is set on justifying the existence of evil. He argues that it is natural and necessary: perfection palls; it is the climb towards perfection *via* the conquest of evil that brings the highest satisfaction (though I do not see why we should strive to attain a condition that is going to bore us when it is achieved). Evil is said to be an inchoate form of good, hate the beginning of love. It is explained that there is a

*complicated scheme to make amends—  
Evil, the scheme by which, through Ignorance,  
Good labours to exist.*

The argument is carried further by Pope Innocent, who says,

*I can believe this dread machinery  
Of sin and sorrow, would confound me else,  
Devised . . . to evoke,  
By new machinery in counterpart,  
The moral qualities of man*

—a belief which would be easier to hold if the ‘dread machinery’ were more successful in producing the intended results. But the Pope is, as he must be, quite clear: ‘God devised pain’—though ‘at most expenditure of pain’ to Himself.

Browning’s personal views become more explicit in the *Fancies* and the *Parleyings*. He chose to discuss the problem of evil with Bernard de Mandeville, whose deeper teaching, he declares, was the harmonious combination of good with evil. Replying to objections made (perhaps) by Carlyle, he suggests that good thrives only through the neighbourhood of evil. Giving a new turn to the Prometheus myth he says man demanded to understand the sun, and was given fire, a simple attribute

of the sun, whence he might infer the sublime source. So we must be content with the 'facts' of Power, Knowledge and Will, add to them Immensity, Eternity—and have faith.

In a later *Parleying* the painter Francis Furini seems to be speaking for Browning, since Browning has told him to go ahead and refute the cultured sceptics of to-day. Moreover, Furini begins with Browning's own 'two known facts', God and the self. He goes on to say he believes we can only know good through evil: the strife of good with evil instructs the soul. Evil is not (now) disguised good: it is a positive thing, needed by good. If we believed that pain was disguised pleasure we should do nothing to save people from pain (this seems to contradict what was said in the *Mandeville*: if it is right to alleviate that form of evil called pain, why was it said to be wrong to try to eradicate evil itself?)

Browning's thinking about evil is vitiated by the assumption that whatever is right. It agrees with the teachings of the Churches, and of most religious moralists, in his own day and ours. I have already noted that he here and there seems to hint at the more promising idea that evil comes about through God's intentions going awry (whence man's function to fulfil God's purpose by putting them straight). There is perhaps another glimpse of this in the word 'Ignorance' (with its capital letter) in one of the passages quoted:

*Evil, the scheme by which, through Ignorance,  
Good labours to exist.*

But the glib apologies for evil, the notion of suffering as a 'good thing', must break down when evil and suffering rise to monstrous, unconscionable heights, so that the 'scheme', the 'machinery'—if they had any reality—would be obviously wicked in design and futile in result. Evil is not to be appeased by calling it soft names: it has to be recognized and destroyed. And this even if it be decided that the teleology of the universe is æsthetic not moral: evil is no less hateful under the name of ugliness.

Theories of evil are one thing, the philosophy of acceptance is another, and this is propounded *via* Ferishtah in *The Melon-Seller*: the deepest wisdom has been achieved only when we can say—'in Persian phrase' or in Job's—shall we receive good at the hand of God and evil not receive? The question is argued at greater length in another parable, that of *Mihrab Shahi*. It is asked why God has made pain an element in

life, why evil of any kind. By a sort of Socratic question and answer Ferishtah leads up to his solution: if there were no pain we should not be inclined to give thanks to God for escape from it, and should not have cause for pity, and in the absence of pity we should not love our fellows; without thanks to God and love for man, man would be worthless. The conclusion is unimpeachable, but the two positions leading up to it are open to criticism. It is not true that thanks to God is evoked only by the absence of pain, what Saul called 'the wild joy of living' is a positive thing, and prompts its own praise. For the second point, we love our friends whether they are suffering or not—why then should we not feel kindly towards mankind (which is as far as most of us can get towards loving them) when they are not asking for our pity but just quietly getting on with their jobs. Love comes most purely out of pure happiness.<sup>1</sup>

The best of the *Fancies* (and few of them have the force and charm associated with the true parable) is the last, with the bizarre title, *A Bean-Stripe: also, Apple-Eating*, which is intended to show that life is better than it might seem if judged by moments. Ferishtah, arranging a row of beans alternately black and white, says he sees the row as grey (an unfortunate adjective—the beans might have been red and white, so that they looked pink!):

*Wherefore? Because my view is wide enough . . .  
Motion achieves it: stop short—fast we stick,  
Probably at the bean that's blackest.*

How true that is for most people, but the lines are a neat way of saying that the moving, changing quality of life is of its essence. The view is modified 'according to our eyes' scope, power of range'.

[I] move and make—myself—the black, the white,  
The good, the bad, of life's environment.  
. . . Passage at an end—  
Past, present, future pains and pleasures fused  
So that one glance may gather blacks and whites  
Into a lifetime, like my bean-stripe there—  
Why, white they whirl into, not black, for me.

<sup>1</sup> The sufferings of the Jews under the Nazis set up in some English people feelings quite other than love.



White, happiness, 'may not triumph': he is always 'sobered by the sorrows of my kind'; yet 'of all-subduing black . . . of that I saw no sample'. You hear a man say life is not worth living, yet such a one probably

*Lived out his seventy years, looked hale, laughed loud,  
Liked above all his dinner—lied, in short!*

Taking another line, Ferishtah says that if life does not rise to our conception of desirability it is because the conception is man's, not God's. Life is blended of God and man, and only as such can it be understood. The forces of nature, which so much affect life, emanate from God, as do our senses, by which we appreciate the world. Hence,

*The sense within me that I owe a debt  
Assures me somewhere must be somebody  
Ready to take his due;*

and if some 'humanist' or 'positivist' should suggest that the thanks are due to 'man', Ferishtah replies that he would as soon think of thanking the apple he eats for the pleasure he gets from it. The ultimate judgments expressed in this last of the parables seem to me sound; they do something to off-set the whimper in *La Saisiaz*.

In his views on evil Browning ended very much where he began. *Rephan*, the ante-penultimate poem of his last volume, restates earlier positions by way of a story taken over (with characteristic modifications) from Jane Taylor. The speaker has come from 'the star of the God Rephan', where evil was unknown: everything was perfect, and 'absolute bliss' was universal. There was no want, no sin, no fear, no change—and there was no hope either.

*Weak and strong,  
The wise and the foolish right and wrong,  
Were merged alike in a neutral best.*

(But is 'best' neutral?) The result was a complete absence of aspiration, of striving; there was no sense of a beyond, of the Infinite (and therefore, one must point out, no 'absolute' happiness). So he had changed to earth, where, though there is much that is wrong there is also 'assurance that, earth at end',

*Wrong shall prove right, who made shall mend  
In the higher sphere to which yearnings tend.*

But doesn't this mean a return to Rephan and its perfection? Or does it point to that earlier more interesting conception of heaven as 'life for ever old yet new'?—which would obviate the danger of a (possibly) dull perfection.

Browning resembled Wordsworth in this: the greater part of his poetry has a tragic content, yet from his poetry there is deducible a philosophy of happiness. For the purpose of happiness, it was necessary that the fact of evil should be explained, and though Browning's explanation that evil is really a kind of good seems to me unsatisfactory it served. To Hardy and Conrad evil was just irrational malignancy, and consequently their lives and books were steeped in unhappiness. Browning was a happy man, and we can learn happiness from his poetry, though he had not Wordsworth's subtle analytical understanding of happiness. No man could even frame the expression, 'the wild joy of living', unless he had known happiness, but the difference between Browning's sense of happiness and Wordsworth's may be measured by comparing this expression with the parallel one in *Michael*—'the pleasure that there is in life itself'. When Fra Lippo exclaims, 'the world's no blot nor blank: to me it means intensely, and means good', he is speaking for Browning. So too the dying man:

*Do I view this world as a vale of tears?  
Ah, reverend sir, not I!*

We have just heard Ferishtah assert that when he looks back on life, with its dark and its bright, his general impression is one of brightness. No one doubts that Browning is speaking in his own person in *Prospice*, when he declares his readiness to pay, in the pangs of death, 'glad life's arrears of pain, darkness and cold'. It is this last handsome admission that makes it hard to forgive that pusillanimous passage in *La Saisiaz* about sorrow prepondering in his own life, which I must regard as a moan out of a temporary depression. Before the year was out he had returned to sanity, if one may judge by his comment on the second of the *Two Poets of Croisic*: how 'weigh the worth of poets'? he asks, and answers:

*End the strife  
By asking, 'Which one led a happy life?'*

The one who did, he says, is to be counted victor over the other who 'yelled or shrieked or sobbed or wept or wailed or simply had the dumps', the great poet is

*A strong since joyful man who stood distinct  
Above slave-sorrows to his chariot linked.*

This is the authentic tone and utterance.

It was only two years before *La Saisiaz*, too, that he wrote that fascinating poem, *At the 'Mermaid'*—a finished and beautiful work of art, clear as crystal, all but lyrical. Of course we know who is supposed to be speaking, but the prefatory adaptation from Jonson allows us to take it that the substance of the poem is pure Browning. The argument is that he (or Shakespeare) cannot be an accepted, 'laureate' poet because he does not wear his heart on the sleeve of his poetry like Byron. It is an odd argument, for few great poets outside the nineteenth century did this. But he goes on to give us, in a series of brilliant figures, a sketch of a way of life which, since we do not know enough about Shakespeare to say whether it fits him or not, must be taken to fit Browning. Life, he says, smacks sweet to him; he remembers his youth with pleasure, and age brings no failure of joy.

*Must in death your daylight finish?  
My sun sets to rise again . . .  
I find earth not grey but rosy,  
Heaven not grim but fair of hue.  
Do I stoop? I pluck a posy.  
Do I stand and stare? All's blue.*

Above all, where so many men claim to have found women 'False and fickle, vain and weak', he disowns 'this sad nomenclature', for he 'threw Venus'—won the highest possible prize in that great game. Wherefore he has 'lived and liked', and has never once 'wished death before the day appointed'.

It is an inspiring picture of the way life may be taken. This is the Browning whose intimately felt religion gave him that sense of the miraculous in life which flows from happiness. He appears to have

distrusted the miracles narrated in the Gospels, but he speaks in *Pauline* of his 'belief in signs and omens', he told Elizabeth in 1845 of his 'life of wonders, absolute wonders', and in the opening of *The Ring and the Book* he tells how he was 'pushed' towards the fateful stall 'by a Hand always above my shoulder'. The words 'miracle' and 'miraculous' occur in Browning with more than three times the frequency of their occurrence in Tennyson, and five times that in Wordsworth. To those who find happiness impossible with so much unhappiness around, Browning replies in the Epilogue to *Ferishtah*: the soul that is enriched and sustained by love cannot be depressed even by the woe of the world, being inspired to set off against the sorrow 'all the good and beauty'.

Browning's personal happiness and his religious conviction that all is for the best constitute the joint basis of the optimism for which he was long loved and is now, in an age of passing shallow cynicism, disliked. Optimism is a philosophy, a considered judgment on life, often, though not necessarily, associated with happiness, which is mainly a matter of temperament. In the well-known lines from *Fra Lippo*, the middle sentence, 'to me it means intensely', stands for happiness, the other two — 'the world's no blot nor blank . . . it means good' — are the judgments of optimism. Optimism looks at life, weighs it impartially up, and concludes that it is good, that is, with a reasonable preponderance of good, or with the good mattering more than the bad. When the pessimist says he has dug deeper and found the source of tears the optimist delves one yard below his mines and blows him to the moon. Optimism is a philosophy; pessimism is an angry reaction to life; but both are tenable and respectable. It is cynicism that is a disease and a sin.

If Browning, sharing the fate of Keats and Shelley, had died at twenty-eight, we should have wondered at the magnificence of his short-lived gift, but we should never have guessed from the serious and strenuous work he would have left — *Pauline*, *Paracelsus*, *Strafford* and *Sordello* — that he had in him the promise of becoming the only poet whose name is always associated with optimism. Instead of dying, he flung off his inky cloak and appeared the gay troubadour, bringing *Pippa* and the *Cavalier Tunes*, the *Piper* and the rest, together with some brave pronouncements. It was with Pippa's briefest song that he first infuriated the unco-guid.

*God's in his heaven—  
All's right with the world!*

They were driven to explain that this was the ignorant little mill-hand's idea, not the poet's, as they had fobbed Keats's epigram off on the urn. But Browning, like Keats, spoke from the heart. The punctuation should be noted. These are not two further statements parallel with the half-dozen that have preceded. Those were separated by semi-colons; these are connected by a dash, which makes the second line dependent on the first (to which nobody objects). And the two lines are introduced by a colon, with an illative not an additive force. It is a simple deduction from intelligent observation of the natural phenomena enumerated that the world is God's creation, whence all must—ultimately—be right with the world, and all would, on a fine spring morning that was a whole holiday, be entirely right here and now not only to a little mill-hand but to any adult as sane and fit as Browning, and willing to sink logic in intuitive apprehension. It must have given him great æsthetic satisfaction to follow his simple enumeration of morning joys with that tremendous and defiant metaphysical conclusion (*'ce chant de coq matinal'*, Professor de Reul calls the lines), though he never again allowed himself or any of his characters to make so unqualified a claim.

Perhaps the poem that comes nearest as an expression of downright optimism is the last poem of all, the famous *Epilogue to Asolando*. Forty years ago, when the amateur of literature was almost invariably a Browning devotee, he (more often she) used to find some difficulty in the second stanza of the *Epilogue*, because of two ambiguities. 'Mistaken' might mean 'in error', but means 'misunderstood', and 'did I drivel' is not a statement but a rhetorical question (and should have a query after it). But the rest of the poem is gloriously clear, and embodies in its massive and confident metre the two foremost of Browning's teachings—courage and hope in this world, faith in the next as a continuation of the work of life.

The two poems are separated by nearly half a century, and over the intervening years expressions of what George Saintsbury called 'brains and courage and the upward countenance' are scattered with some regularity. The Abbé's deduction from the mysterious nature of music—'There shall never be one lost good . . . the evil is null, is nought'—is generalized into a philosophic truth by Pompilia: 'This is the note of evil'—that it passes and is forgotten—'but good lasts'. According to whether you accept this or deny it you are an optimist or a pessimist. So too with the Pope's 'stray beauty-beam' which is always there 'to the despair of hell', though this, as a truth, is neither so universal nor so

significant. A third expression of faith—for optimism is another word for faith<sup>1</sup>—is to be found in the last three lines of the *Pompilia*:

*Through such souls alone  
God stooping shows sufficient of His"light  
For us in the dark to rise by.*

Most people are obsessed by the depravity of human nature at its worst, and hazed by its pretty poor showing at its normal. Mankind should, I think, be judged (like a poet's work) on its best specimens, and the shining excellence of the really good man or woman provides reasonable grounds for belief in the divine origin and destiny of the soul. Hardy and Conrad, both of whom take a poor view of human fate, are clear in a heroic conception of man himself.

Browning is by no means the complete optimist. The poem placed as prologue to the *Asolando* volume takes a somewhat different attitude from that of the *Epilogue*. The poem is a Browning version of the *Immortality Ode*, and the first two stanzas, enclosed in inverted commas, contain four direct references to Wordsworth. Declaring it is better to see 'the naked very thing' than falsely through a rose-coloured lens, the poet goes on to say that there was a time when natural objects were to him 'palpably fire-clothed'—the Bush was burning. But now, though beauty still abounds, the Bush is bare and dead, the fire of God is extinguished. In place of Wordsworth's solution—a return to childhood's vision—Browning suggests that this early vision was but a dazzlement, and that he now sees God more clearly: yet Elizabeth had written, out of her mature experience, 'Earth's crammed with heaven, and every bush and tree afire with God'. Browning's use of the word *transcends*—'God is it who transcends'—might seem to indicate that what he felt before was God's immanence in nature, and that he regards transcendence as the higher truth. Certainly he lacks Wordsworth's intimate sense of 'something far more deeply interfused'.

There are other severe modifications of the optimistic outlook. I have already shown that the very late poem *Reverie* puts into final form that preoccupation of Browning's with what he felt to be the deficiency of love in God's display of power in human affairs. And there is something cheerless in the picture drawn in *Cleon* of the soul's growing capacity

<sup>1</sup> Faith is indeed the better word 'My faith', says Mr Bernard Berenson, 'consists in the certainty that life is worth living, life on its own terms'

for joy defeated by a steady decrease in 'physical reciprocity'. That versified riot, *Pacchiarotto and how he worked in Distemper*, propounds, amid all its foolery, two serious ideas, the first somewhat comfortless—that we are not to expect our work in this life to succeed,

*Because if success were intended,  
Why, heaven would begin ere earth ended;*

the second meant perhaps as a sop for the other—that Earth is but the Induction to Heaven, that 'things rarely go right at rehearsal', and that the Artist's purpose will be explained at the fall of the curtain. This is a tarnished and spurious optimism: the real thing sees good at all stages. So too the *Pisgah Sights*, where we are given a colourless quietism. We are to bury ambition, realizing the smallness of the apparently big and attractive; there is to be no soaring to the sun, instead a modest walk over the grass; earth is to be accepted as it is—there is to be no trying to change it by being 'creative'. The wise man acquiesces in the mixture which is life, a globe where rough and smooth still make up a sphere. (Blake's metaphor of a fabric, where 'joy and woe are woven fine', seems more illuminating.)

A forcible and balanced presentation of the whole matter is given in the strange tale of the Rabbi Jochanan, who, being about to die, has his life extended for a year through the gifts of four elderly friends, each of whom contributes (by a sort of spiritual blood-transfusion) three months of life. The idea is that he shall be given time to utter more of the wisdom for which he is famous, but the result is at first only some outbursts of cynicism on the themes of love, valour, poetry and statesmanship. Later he is found to have secured a further extension by the gift of a boy, and in this period he is inspired by the operation of youth-in-age to a speech full of fire and light. He says the snakes of doubt, fear and experience have been driven from his heart, leaving hope triumphant. Follow the light is his word, and even if it leads you into darkness march boldly on. He feels that the passionate impulse of youth and the slow conviction of age form an amalgam fused by God, with reviving and healing powers. Life is a wine-press which blends evil and good into a novel drink fit for strong brains. Disabused of the limitations of reason, the Rabbi sees truth through the primal clarity of intuition, with right and wrong reconciled. This was the ultimate wisdom of the 'sinner-saint, live-dead, boy-man'.

There is evidently nothing light-hearted or superficial about Browning's optimism. In so far as his hope is solely in heaven his philosophy is merely a masquerading pessimism. But in the *Parleying* with Gerard de Lairese I think hope in this life is to be perceived. Browning expresses

*Heart's satisfaction that the Past indeed  
Is past, gives way before Life's best and lust,  
The all-including Future . . .*

The 'best Greece babbled of as truth' is folly to our better-informed minds. Gerard is recommended to leave digging about roots, and to climb up to flower and fruit ripening in the blaze of day. This I believe they call meliorism, the belief that things are getting better. As a philosophy it will pass, but your genuine optimist insists that things are not too bad now. That Browning thought this is a fair deduction from his poetry. The feeling for life, the joyous acceptance of the whole of life, which gives the poems their characteristic colour is a vivid thing beside what has been called Tennyson's 'terrified denial of pessimism'. The pronouncements on life are preponderantly sober, but the sky is lighted by courage and hope and faith.

## 6

I have left *Fifine at the Fair* as a *bonne-bouche*, the savoury to finish off the philosophic meal which has been exercising our digestive powers in the present chapter. It is, if not the most important, the most intriguing of Browning's didactic poems. The moral issue is not one that he might have been expected to handle so fully, boldly and subtly; and the narrative or monological basis has a certain liveliness in spite of the Alexandrines (a metre in which no English poet can be anything but flat-footed—yet how lightly it moves at the command of a Rostand). Rhapsodize as he may, Juan has his eye on, and never lets us lose our sense of, the Fair that throbs and thrills around us.

It is current form (Mr Osbert Burdett dissenting) to follow the Americans and see Lady Ashburton's handsome face behind this poem as behind others. I see no necessity for any such special explanation of the mood of the poem, and that mood does not seem to me to be either 'dark' (Raymond), 'bitter' (de Vane), or one of 'perplexing cynicism', as Mrs Orr thought it, describing the poem also as 'a plea for self-indulg-



ence'. This is to miss the satiric intention. On the other hand I cannot feel with Mr Osbert Burdett that the poem is a detached psychological study of the Don Juan type. I think it quite possible that the Ashburton affair set Browning on to reflecting on the number and intimacy of his female friendships, from which he would pass to a realization that this fact about himself was only one of the more kindly aspects of the polygamous nature of the male of the human species, which gets itself expressed in such generalizations as Shelley's 'True love in this differs from gold and clay, That to divide is not to take away'. He thought he would see what could be said in defence of the tendency. He would write a poem of which the sub-title might well be *Any Husband to Any Wife*. He approached the subject not cynically but with interest and amusement. But he did not mean Juan, his typical husband, to get away with it, any more than Sludge or Blougram or Guido. He knew well that the polygamous instinct belongs to the primitive exuberant wasteful stage of natural development, and that monogamy is among the supreme spiritual achievements of civilized man, so he took care that Juan's arguments should ring hollow, and that he should, like the other casuists, trip and flop before he had finished. Browning told Domett that *Fifine* was his 'boldest and most metaphysical poem since *Sordello*', but his Juan cannot hold a candle to Shaw's, either in casuistry or in originality. The perambulatory sophisms of Elvire's long-winded husband are paper-thin; we do at least have to look squarely at the epigrams that illuminate the Shavian Hell before they are seen to be only half-truths.

There is an exquisitely written apologue of Galsworthy's called *Maggie over the Hill*, wherein a good honest boy is seduced for a brief while from his sweetheart, a 'clean sober little maid', between whom and the boy was a 'sedate sweet loving', by a brown wild slanting-eyed gypsy girl, but turns back to his trusting love at the sound of her lonely weeping, leaving the lawless elf-thing in a silent agony of abandoned grief: an allegory of sacred and profane love, says Galsworthy, and asks which was which. Browning is less impartial: his *Fifine* is not drawn so obviously seductive as to move our hearts or even to blind our eyes, while Elvire, though seldom getting a word in with her voluble husband, produces a pleasing effect of gracious silence and patient reasonableness.

Juan's first argument is both platitudinous and specious. He invokes, as they all do, the well-worn name of liberty: he is 'frenetic to be free'—

free from a dutiful regard for the rules of respectability. Elvire listens complacently while he talks abstractions, but is suddenly depressed—Juan has caught sight of Fifine, and begins to rave about her beauty. Fifine is 'mischievous and mean', but 'free and flower-like', though neither daisy nor violet but a poisonous variety. He calls her his queen, but adds, with some inconsequence—'I think it is Elvire we love, and not Fifine'; 'we' being presumably the flighty husbands who are faithful to Cynara in their fashion.

Then Juan widens his ground. He imagines a procession of beauties—Helen, Cleopatra, a fair saint—and puts Fifine among them, calling her most beautiful of all, apparently on the principle of a bird in the hand. Once again, in contempt of logic, he declares that Elvire is after all the ideal, because though Fifine is physically attractive, body is nothing if it is not the manifestation of mind. Yet Fifine's charm is that she demands no more than admiration for her external prettiness, makes no exclusive claim on a man. This is the myth, which should not deceive an intellectual like Juan, of the marriageable charm of the brainless doll.

Elvire growing restless again, Juan holds her fast and speaks for her the protests he knows are in her mind: 'I am grown older in face, but unchanged in soul. Yet your love is not what it was. Once you were hungry for my smile, which is now a household commonplace. Having got what you wanted, you have ceased to value it: you go after lesser lights, preferring to me, "chaste, temperate, serene . . . the fizzig called Fifine".' But, Juan replies, that is the way of the world. Suppose I buy a Raphael at a great price. For a month or two I never take eyes off it. Then I leave it for inferior pictures, but all the while I am aware that the Raphael is there, and worth more than all the others put together: in a moment of danger I should save that first of all. In short, Cynara over again. And lo! Elvire is content. At least Juan imagines so:

*For which I get the eye, the hand, the heart, the whole  
O' the wondrous wife again!*

By a fortunate chance Elvire herself has a superb beauty, which Juan says completes his soul. This leads him on to a discourse on the soul and its correlation with the face. He says, with more truth than relevance, that love can create in the loved one's face a beauty to match the soul as the sculptor brings out the goddess from the stone: so Juan does with Elvire. The soul is a world made up of its own most vital experiences,

and love is perfect when two souls can share their individual gains from life. Juan's gain had been to learn force and self-indulgence, Elvire's pity and self-sacrifice: naturally they would supplement each other, and through the combination each would become—or each would discern in the other—a true soul, an entity which is described in a phrase drawn from Aeschylus: 'God, man, or both together mixed.'

Here Elvire interpolates a pointed objection: you talk, she says, in a large way about soul, but your adventures are all in the domain of sense. You find it necessary to go through a world of women (Fifine is but a sample)—a world of women in the flesh in order to arrive at soul.

*Who is it you deceive—  
Yourself or me or God, with all this make-believe?*

Compelled thus to justify his fabrications, Juan, complaining that he could do so better in music, starts with an analogy, that of bathing in the bay. You learn, he says, from swimming that you can only exist and breathe the air (of reality) by keeping yourself completely immersed in the water (of falsehood).<sup>1</sup> The closer your contact with the false the better your knowledge of truth. 'I myself have found not only this, but that by long acquaintance with the false I am able to control it—ultimately to leave sea for land, where there is no shortage of air. For it is air I want, not sea but sky, and by catching at Fifine I seize Elvire. Look at us now—we set out to enjoy the fair, but Fifine has lifted us to heights of thought.'

This audacity rouses Elvire to ask another acute question—'But why must it always be a woman who helps you to truth?' And for once Juan's cynical lips speak something of his creator's intuitive wisdom in humorously succinct form:

*Because one woman's worth in that respect such hairy hosts  
Of the other sex and sort!*

Men live their separate positive lives, women ('any sort of woman', Juan says) enter into your being and so give you knowledge. To do anything with a man you must deceive him, disguise yourself and descend to his level. With a woman you can dare to be your highest self; if you

<sup>1</sup> There is an interesting parallel in Conrad's *Lord Jim*. The German Stem is speaking: 'Man that is born falls into a dream like a man who falls into the sea. If he tries to climb out into the air he drowns. . . . No, I tell you! The way is to the destructive element submit yourself. . . . In the destructive element immerse. . . .'

deceive at all it is that you pretend to be a little higher than you really are. Women rise to love, while man's best effort is brought out in response to hate.

*No, 'tis ungainly work, the ruling men, at best!  
The graceful instinct's right: 'tis women stand confessed  
Auxiliary, the gain that never goes away,  
Takes nothing and gives all.*

(The first recognition in poetry of the woman-secretary!) A woman helps a man by believing in him. Juan will learn truth 'because Fifine knows me! How much more if Elvire!'¹

And why, asks Elvire, making her final protest before sinking beneath the flood of oratory—and why not *only* Elvire? Why does the boatman prefer to push dangerously about in that cockle-shell, *Fifine*, when he might be sailing safely in the good ship, *Elvire*, moored there in the dock? Well, Juan replies, men like change and chance. Fifine, false as she is, is very attractive; Elvire is true and honest, but *too* safe, offers no excitement—hence the temptation to try his skill in dangerous experiment. When the Fair arrived yesterday his 'heart' had told him that somewhere there was dressing and preparing 'some girl by fate reserved to give me once again the electric snap and spark' which prove that the world contains 'fire and life and truth'. 'Then never grudge my poor Fifine her compliment.' While the good ship *Elvire* refits in port, Fifine's little pinnace may carry him to Athens and back. 'Thanks therefore to Fifine—Elvire, I'm back with you! Share in the memories!' It is to be hoped that Elvire's silence this time covered an unspoken 'Damn your impudence!'

He praises 'Fifine and her tribe' because they alone admit they are simulating, acting a part, while the rest of us simulate but claim to be sincere. 'Life means learning to abhor the false and love the true'—hence the value of 'honest cheating' and our enjoyment of the Fair. (Juan is at his greasiest in these moments of solemn priggishness.)

He begins to relate a dream, prefacing some interesting remarks on poets:

*A poet never dreams:  
We prose-folk always do.*

¹ All this is put in my stical Morganesque terms in Book II, Chapter II, of *Sparkeubroke*.

Poets possess, in poetry, the natural outlet of the fancy, 'thoughts on things unseen'; prose-folk, lacking this outlet, find that fancy 'stagnates' and produces dreams, sleeping or waking. So he recounts his dream, but has got no further than that he was sitting by an open window, through which came floating in country sights and sounds, fancies, memories, 'ante-natal prime, experience', when he interrupts himself to complain again that 'no speech may evince feeling like music', and to call Schumann's *Carnaval* to his aid. The music takes him to Venice, city of carnival.

Here the monologue abandons the original theme of fidelity versus flirtation, and loses all its liveliness. The aim of the enquiry now becomes the nature of change and reality. Juan goes on that in his dream he seemed to be looking down upon the revellers in their grotesque, even bestial, masks. No sound came from the crowd, but this was to the good—words deceive, but if you can see truth you are sure of it. He went down amongst them, and found the masks less revolting. Human nature was there, but twisted from its intention—there had been some fault or hesitancy 'which checked the man and let the beast appear' (is this another glimpse of Creative Evolution?). He saw the necessity for defect—it gave flesh a protective coarseness: the body is the hard casing of the soul, as a rough stone may have a dew-drop at its centre.

Perceiving that Venice stood for the world and carnival for mankind, Juan says that by this time he had learnt three truths: that in man's make-up there is 'just enough, and not too much of hate, love, greed and lust'; that we must welcome what is, and not fret about what should be; and that even what is is only temporary, since change goes on unceasingly. Now the vision of Venice fades, leaving one somewhat ugly building—a mishap of the architect, but still useful if we will but look up at it, 'Commercing with the skies and not the pavement'. Buildings pass, philosophies fade, but religion, lodged in 'the house not made with hands', teaches that truth changes but never dies; all is change yet all is permanence. By this time nothing is left of his vision except a single strange shape of indestructible stone, reminding us that 'all the while we come and go, outside there's Somebody that stays'. Then without warning we are given another taste of Browning's probation theory:

*Whatever end we answer by this life,  
Next time best chance must be for who, with toil and strife,  
Manages now to live most like what he was meant  
Become.*

Juan emphasizes that through his dream had run the truth of permanence amid change. Change is the knowledge we get by our senses, and the soul must work through this to eternal truth. Change implies falsehood, but leads towards ultimate truth, which will be known by the soul looking up in love not down in hate. And what is this fixed truth? It is, for the third time, 'God, man, or both together mixed'—that soul to discover which it has been necessary to lift the veils of the sensually false and reveal 'the Ultimate'.

The poem emerges from dream and philosophic abstraction and returns to the Fair and the controversy it promoted. Blending his two themes, Juan states his conclusion—raw humanity is given to inconstancy, but the ripe man has a solid faith: the changing Fines lead to the permanence of Elvire. Fine is a mere foam-flake, Elvire the calm and profound sea. The natural man inclines to freedom, but after wandering decides that home is best. And here we are home again—'here's the villa-door'.

These conclusions are those at which we would have Juan arrive—if we could believe he holds them sincerely. And he turns to Elvire with feelings, or at least words, far above the poem's general level:

*How pallidly you pause o' the threshold! Hardly night,  
Which drapes you, ought to make real flesh and blood so white!  
Touch me, and so appear alive to all intents!  
Will the saint vanish from the sinner that repents?  
Suppose you are a ghost! a memory, a hope.  
A fear, a conscience! Quick! give back the hand I grope  
I' the dusk for!*

This short section CXXX is the dew-drop of poetry hid in the heart of the great rough stone of *Fine at the Fair*. But for what follows I should be inclined to believe that in it Elvire has become for a moment palpably Elizabeth.

For it is land the solid and safe, not the sea, that Elvire typifies. So, says Juan, they will, after all, live soberly, and away from the sea, lest sight of it revive memories of swimming in that rickle element—as a matter of fact his joints are now too rheumatic for swimming! There is a sarcastic note here, as also about the 'honest civic house' he proposes to retire to with Elvire, and she cannot have expected too much from the apparent reform of the rake. Still, he invites her in,

*then fate bolt fast the door,  
Shut you and me inside, never to wander more*

—and it is with a shock that we come, in the last section, on the cynical ending: Juan takes leave of Elvire, and goes off for just five minutes with *Fifine*:

*five minutes past, expect me. If in vain,  
Why, slip from flesh and blood, and be a ghost again!*

For a reader who has followed the scene with human sympathy, this (with the seeming reference to stanza CXXX quoted) is appallingly cruel. I have called the poem *Any Husband to Any Wife*, and one remembers the equally terrible crash in the last few words of *Any Wife*: 'And yet, it will not be.' It was, as we know from *Blougram* and *Sludge*, a habit with Browning to give his casuistical apologies an unexpected ending.

This ending of Juan, showing him, for all his rhetoric and flattery, a mere heartless cad, disposes of the idea that Browning was in any way entangled with the ethics of his puppet. By the same reasoning *Fifine at the Fair* is not 'another example of Browning's willingness to override the normal rules of conduct' (it is sometimes put, in this respect, with *The Statue and the Bust*, in which also I have refused to see antinomianism). The poem has far less moral significance than *Blougram*, and is even more of an exercise in special pleading than *Sludge*; but it is fascinating for the wealth of human material with which the wire-drawn argument is covered. On the other hand, the defence of the flirtatious relics of biological polygamy is conducted with such gusto that it seems impossible to regard the poem, with de Vane, as 'a veiled criticism' of Rossetti's *Jenny*. Swinburne, who gave the ill-considered opinion that *Fifine* was the best thing Browning had ever done, certainly did not see it as an attack on 'the fleshly school'.

I have to admit that it is possible to see darkness and despair in the conclusion of the poem. Browning may really have meant the quoted section CXXX, the ghost, the saint, appearing to the sinner that repents, to represent the deathless love by which he held and hoped, and Juan's cynical lapse to show the unideal facts of his actual life—'look at me: this is my dream, and this my practice: I can no other'. This would indicate a quite extraordinary degree of self-critical detachment, and I

think the more impersonal reading has more to be said for it—*any* husband, not this particular husband, R.B.

*Fifine at the Fair* is a didactic poem, executed in verse which adds nothing to the argument. Its Prologue, *Amphibian*, and its Epilogue, *The Householder*, represent the other two kinds of poetry of which Browning was a master. *The Householder* is lyric; *Amphibian* is amphibian. The metrical form of the latter is perfect, and though it does not sing gives great delight. Its logical content is stated with beautiful precision and clarity. It says there are three degrees of life—spiritual, material, and imaginative, the third being a human counterpart of the first, indulged in at strain and risk, so that the relapse into mortal life brings a sense of comfort and safety. Browning's prologues and epilogues seldom have any significant connection with the works they accompany, and the thought just epitomized has no bearing on the *Fifine* controversy, though the sea-metaphor which in *Amphibian* stands for imagination represents free-love in the main poem: to read 'unable to fly, one swims' as meaning 'unable to love, one flirts' is to make nonsense of the rest of the poem.

*Amphibian* is versified philosophy, but it is also a love-poem, by reason of its feeling that 'a certain soul which early slipped its sheath' is looking from heaven upon the bereaved poet with pity and wonder. This feeling takes complete lyric possession of the epilogue. Some commentators think *The Householder* is a continuation of the main poem, and shows Juan 'punished'. This is quite absurd. In *The Householder* Browning spits the taste of Juan out of his mouth, and returns passionately, rhythmically, to the good eternal domestic love of *By the Fireside*. Does the poem need 'explaining'? The 'house' is the body, and the poet, solitary householder, imagines himself in one of those moods of desperate desolation of which we get glimpses all through the later poetry. And, as must so often have happened in his dreams, suddenly there again was 'She', come to fetch him. He is eager to go, and would make a violent exit, but 'She' advises 'a decency'. He protests—'But I'm so sick of it all!'<sup>1</sup> and 'She', rather audaciously for a Victorian, hints that heaven was equally intolerable without him. And so to the resounding final imperishable truth—that death can but interrupt true love—

<sup>1</sup> Now I do fancy the lines—

Who were they had leave, dared try  
Darker arts that almost struck despair in me?

—*might* refer to Lady Ashburton; if so, it was not quite fair of Browning to push the blame on to her, as if he were passive and helpless.



*'I end with—Love is all and death is nought', quoth She.*

Judged from whatever standpoint, there are few more perfect love-lyrics in Browning, or in any other poet.

7

Browning's religious and philosophical opinions ought not to have occupied so much space as I have found it necessary to devote to them. But Browning was not a 'pure poet', and great numbers of readers derive enormous pleasure and interest from delving into those extensive areas of his work where a rich satisfying loam of thought is lightly covered by a scanty crop of poetic grasses. The third of our puritan poets, as he has been called, he allows a much larger ratio of puritanism to poetry than either Milton or Wordsworth. Nevertheless his opinions are generally arrived at poetically, as they should be with a poet. Santayana was paying him an unintended compliment when he said he had no metaphysical theory, but spoke from temperament. On certain large matters he had made up his mind, but the truths for which his unæsthetic readers go to him are found in the form of those 'recurrent insights' which Professor Leone Vivanti says should constitute a poet's philosophy. This is so, at all events, in nearly all the shorter poems, and in most of the longer ones published before 1872. He could hardly have written in an age earlier than his own. Once the earnest Victorians had got over his 'obscurity', and had discovered that what he had to say was worth taking some trouble to understand, they turned to him as a friend, philosopher and guide with an enthusiasm no other generation would have shown.

What did they find? What, of the mass of intellectual material considered in the foregoing chapter, seems to have permanent value? Not, certainly, the sectarian preferences and antipathies expressed in *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* and the outbursts of religious satire. What may be a poet's pet corner in the temple of religious belief is of even less interest than his politics, and ought not to make its way into his verse: it would not be easy to say, from reading the poetry of Milton and of Francis Thompson, which was the Puritan and which the Roman Catholic. But Browning's steady faith in God as a working presence in life is something that has brought strength to many, though this cannot be said of his anxious insistence on the necessity of Christ. Similarly,

though the belief in an after-life as a compensation for the ills of this one can commend itself only to a limited audience, his faith—almost amounting to mystic knowledge—in the fact of that after-life, expressed in a score of different ways—

*Wheresoever life resume  
School interrupted by vacation—death*

—this, and the virile desire to be carrying on a glad life-work 'there as here', give a religious heart to the body of his poetry and immensely widen its appeal. The idea of life as probation belongs to a different category, because it is open to much misunderstanding, but I think that, properly interpreted, it represents the sanest and most decent way of relating life and death. I have suggested that Browning also had glimpses of Creative Evolution, which, with its purposive progress towards a visioned but infinitely distant end, seems to me the soundest way of relating God and the universe.

His celebrated optimism we have found to be an uncertain quantity. In so far as it is a reasoned faith (as it can be), it appears in one place positive and triumphant, but will in another timidly disavow its own existence. As Professor Charlton says, there is nothing invigorating in Browning's doctrine that failure on earth is a password to heaven. Nevertheless the great body of the poetry glows with a vital happiness and hope, and he who needs such help may fortify his optimism with hundreds of brave answers to Shelley's dying cry of 'What is life?'

*Life . . . is just our chance of the prize of learning love;*

*Life . . . just a stuff to try the soul's strength on;*

*How good is man's life -- the mere living!*

*Life's a probation, and the world no goal  
But starting point of man.*

*This world's no blot nor blank:  
. . . it means intensely and means good.*

*Grow old along with me, the best is yet to be.*

*The world and life's too big to pass for a dream. . . .*

And of life, chiefly, as he says, its spiritual fulcrum, love: of lasting

worth I must think Browning's treatment of love and of women. He is supremely the poet of married love (far more so than Patmore), and though Shakespeare and Scott glorify woman, only Browning makes her man's acknowledged equal, often his superior. This, which is feminism, is a main pillar of his courageous outlook; only when it enters into the general philosophy of mankind will civilization be able to throw away its crutches and walk swiftly forward.

To say that Browning's philosophy has worn badly probably means nothing more than that it is too strong meat for the acidified stomach of the present age. It was a personal philosophy, born and bred in him, and nourished by the experience of a life lived intensely and devoted to a deepening conviction. Hence it can have a strong appeal only for those people whose lives and convictions belong to the same order as Browning's. But it is only in respect of the spirit, not the details, of his philosophy that he speaks to the twentieth century. He utters a much needed *Sursum corda*, but he attempts to support the message by arguments that have no meaning for us. Our age is more likely to respond to what is eternal in the 'lost leadership' of Wordsworth.

One doctrine of permanent value may be inferred from the rising position of humility as a motive force in the situations depicted in the poems. During those first thirteen years most of the dominant characters (all but Pippa and Luria) suffer from the disease of pride, while in the great period 1850-71, though Blougram, Sludge, Guido and Juan still carry the black flag defiantly, they are engulfed in a host of white-robed exponents of the virtue of humility—David, Karshish, and Childe Roland, the men of *Christmas-Eve* and *By the Fire-side*, Balaustion and Mrs Lee and the woman of the *Last Word*, Lippo Lippi and del Sarto, Pompilia and Caponsacchi and the Pope.

Browning is like Scott and Meredith in that he has a tonic effect, spiritual and physical. I am far from saying that authors, any more than wines, should be approached medicinally. But I am prepared to say that port is a nobler drink than absinthe, and (the alcoholic—æsthetic—demand having first been satisfied) I would always choose a poet who makes for goodness and if possible for happiness. At the same time there are realms untouched by any of these considerations, and the world of Browning's imagination was subject to a limitation which will have to be examined in the final summing-up.

# *'That bard's a Browning—he neglects the form!'*

## I

BEFORE BEGINNING to discuss Browning's art and technique I want to say something about a handful of his poems which themselves deal with poets and poetry. Three of these are in *Men and Women*. *How It Strikes a Contemporary* is a brilliant sketch of a man and his doings, and that man stately a poet:

*I only knew one poet in my life:  
And this, or something like it, was his way.*

And since 'poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world' the man now enchantingly depicted is a poet by reason of the fact that he writes influential letters to 'the King', being thus 'the town's true master'. The description of the doings of this 'man of mark'—his perambulations under his 'scrutinizing hat', his pausing at the book-stalls, his taking note of everything that goes on—is wonderfully like an expansion of Landor's lines about Browning's walking the roads with active step and enquiring eye. It is likely enough that Browning conceived the poet as no recluse but a man of action, affecting destiny by his writings; this was at least Sordello's aim. The descriptive power, the humour, the idiomatic verse are all at the very height of Browning's manner, and taken just at its face value the poem is fascinating, characteristic and memorable.

*Popularity* is one of the enigma poems.

*Stand still, true poet that you are!  
I know you; let me try and draw you.*

He proceeds to show how a pioneering poet may get less credit for his new poetic approach than his followers. He shows this by one of the most striking of all his figures: such a poet is like a Tyrian fisherman dragging up the murex shell with its matchless blue dye; but it is those

who use the dye, 'put blue into their line'—Hobbs, Nobbs, Stokes and Nokes perhaps—it is these later imitators who win the applause really due to the discoverer and provider of the new and glorious colour. And so you get the famous last stanza:

*Hobbs hints blue—straight he turtle eats;  
Nobbs prints blue—claret crowns his cup;  
Nokes outdoes Stokes in azure feats—  
Both gorge. Who fished the murex up?  
What porridge had John Keats?*

Now, it seems to me obvious that 'Keats' is mentioned just because he is the only poet who rhymes with 'eats', and 'feats'. 'Praise and success come to these imitators, but have you forgotten who originated this now accepted and popular mode of poetry? As well ask what kind of porridge Keats—or any other poet long dead and gone—had for breakfast!' Surely the 'true poet' of the first stanza must be—not Keats, as de Vane confidently states, and Professor Charlton agrees—but a contemporary of Browning ('one night you'll fail us', he says—Keats died when Browning was nine), one he 'knows' and sees as a bright particular 'star'. And when he goes on 'My star, God's glow-worm!' I cannot doubt—knowing Browning's passionate belief in his wife's genius—that the fisher up of the shell with the miraculous dye was F.B.B.

'*Transcendentalism: a Poem in Twelve Books*' is again about (this time addressed to) a nameless poet: the poet may have been Dobell with his *Balder* (published two years before *Men and Women*) or one of several other compilers of 'spasmodic' epics; but Browning's warning is more likely to have been a general one to poets, including himself. The poem, which is commendably brief, and written in an easy, nervous, colloquial blank-verse, shows that Browning at least knew the purpose of poetry—not to speak but to sing ('song's our art'), the venting of rhymes that make 'break in the sudden rose', 'pouring heaven into the shut house of life'. A few years later he was largely to forget this sound critical judgment. •

*At the Mermaid* and *House* are from the *Pacchiarotto* volume, and I have already said something about them. They are, especially *House*, with its jaunty snook-cocking stanza, part of the war against the critics. Both condemn the idea that poetry should 'unlock the heart' of the poet and

enable the reader to 'slip inside his breast', but such disapproval is a mere beating of the wind. Ever since Wordsworth and Coleridge gave birth to the new romantic species all lyric poets, including of course Browning, have provided in their poetry a complete spiritual autobiography, though some chapters may be in cypher.

Two of the *Parleyings* deal with poetry. That with Christopher Smart—the eighteenth-century poet on whose mental infirmities Johnson expressed views which were, as usual, far in advance of his time—suggests a form of divine revelation different from anything we might suspect in Browning himself. The searcher after truth, he says, beginning sane and sound, finds the ground suddenly give way beneath his step; smoke curls up round him, a fire-ball engulfs flesh and spirit. This is what happened to Smart, and enabled him, alone 'out of the throngs between Milton and Keats' to 'pierce the screen 'twixt thing and word' and 'light language straight from soul'. The analysis perhaps exaggerates the achievement of Smart, but shows an extraordinarily acute realization of the essential definition of poetry—one that enables him to dismiss the eighteenth century with the last third of the seventeenth (he might have conceded Cowper and Blake).

In the dialogue with Gerard de Lairese, author of the *Treatise of the Art of Painting* which was the companion of Browning's youth, opinions are expressed more in consonance with Browning's own practice. Gerard wished to confine art to the perfection of the classical antique, but Browning doubtless remembered what Elizabeth had said long ago in one of the *Letters*: 'Why should we go back to the antique moulds? . . . Let us all aspire rather to life, and let the dead bury their dead. For there is poetry everywhere.' So he quotes with approval Gerard's admission that the commonplace is not devoid of imaginative material, and he condemns those poets of his own day who despise the crowd and the common scene as being 'daily and undignified' and unworthy of the artist's dream. For himself, he is content to 'abide awake, nor want the wings of dream . . . to tramp earth's common surface'. For 'dreaming', the word has perhaps a special depreciatory meaning with Browning. He said in *Fifine*: 'A poet never dreams: we prose-folk always do.' But Wordsworth's line remains: 'The consecration and the poet's dream.' Certainly on 'earth's common surface' Browning found and portrayed a wider range of people than any other poet of his time.

Some of Browning's views on poetry are made explicit in *Sordello*,

though without being given definable import. All poets, he says, worship beauty, but one kind of poet feels he belongs to what he worships, while the other (Sordello's kind) sees beauty but as a reflection of his own soul, so that homage turns inward. Though Sordello is the 'hero' of the poem, his life is a failure, so we may suppose his creator disapproves (as he rightly may) of this rather 'minor' attitude. A second distinction is drawn between Sordello's kind of poetry and that of Eglamour, the troubadour whom he defeated in a contest of song. For Eglamour, verse was a 'temple-worship', a drawing back of the veil that hides the holy place, a turning of life into beauty (and this is said to be the common man's—Naddo's— notion of poetry). Sordello thinks of poetry rather as a process of leading on from fancy to fancy until inspiration is touched off in the poet's mind. Both distinctions leave Sordello on the wrong side of the line separating the greater poetry which is the result of submission to a creative influence from that lesser kind which is more dependent on its own powers. Yet we are told that Eglamour's song is less 'true' than Sordello's because it is complete in itself, answering its own purpose fully (this sounds like 'classical' poetry: Santayana lamented the absence of classical perfection, shape, finality in Browning), while Sordello's is a dream-performance suggesting a transcending passion and knowledge. Eglamour achieved joy and love: Sordello achieved nothing, but might have anticipated the triumph of Dante. He 'lived for some one better thing', as a child climbs the hillside singing 'some unintelligible words to beat the lark, God's poet'.

There is also in *Sordello* some consideration of the difficulties of poetry arising through lack of comprehension in the poet's audience and the inadequacy of language: 'perceptions whole', like Sordello's, 'reject so pure a work of thought as language'. And yet, surely, the greater the poet the less we feel the inadequacy of language. In spite of Marlowe's proud lament—

*If all the pens that ever poets held . . .*

*Yet would there hover in their restless heads  
One thought, one grace, one wonder at the least  
Which into words no virtue can digest*

—when words, language, have done all they can, and perhaps failed, poetic form comes to the rescue and achieves that last grace, that ulti-

mate wonder. Browning knew this and said it in *The Ring and the Book*: 'Our human speech is nought', but 'Art remains the one way possible of speaking truth'.

## 2

Mr T. S. Eliot's observation that the first requisite for a poet is an innate sense of form commends itself as likely to be true, whatever meaning the word 'form' is intended to bear. Taking it at its lower meaning of metre and stanza, the shape in which the poet presents his conception to the reader, we can say without hesitation that Browning passes the test. He is understood to have destroyed much 'early verse', but his first published work, *Pauline*, shows him a master of blank verse of the normal kind, fluent, with sufficient power and melody, and capable of rising to the ease, variation and charm of a passage like this:

*Autumn has come like Spring returned to us,  
Won from her girliness; like one returned  
A friend that was a lover, nor forgets  
The first warm love, but full of sober thoughts  
Of fading years; whose soft mouth quivers yet  
With the old smile, but yet so changed and still!*

The verse has a Shelleyan basis, but while lacking the full *Alastor* music has very characteristic elements of its own—touches of homeliness and lapses into a prose rhythm.

For nearly ten years he kept to blank verse and the couplet, and then, with the *Dramatic Lyrics*,<sup>1</sup> he showed himself complete master of a great variety of stanza forms. There was a yet more varied abundance to come, but there could be no advance in skill on such verse creations as *Cavalier Tunes I and II*, the *Incident of the French Camp*, or the *Gondola* songs. Advance could come only in beauty, and it is in the later volumes, *Men and Women* and *Dramatis Personæ*, that we find those lovely stanza-forms in respect of which Browning can take his stand with any poet who may be named: *Love among the Ruins*, with the tranquil feeling of its long trochaic lines and the quiet confirmation of the echoing short ones:

<sup>1</sup> It must be remembered that titles, here as elsewhere, refer to the original groupings, not those of the later rearrangement.



*Where the quiet-coloured end of evening smiles  
Miles and miles;<sup>1</sup>*

*A Woman's Last Word*, with its tight miniature stanza faultlessly handled:

*Let's contend no more, Love,  
Strive nor weep:  
All be as before, Love,  
—Only sleep!*

the first poem of James Lee's *Wife*, with its interwoven rhyme scheme, its subtle variation of movement, its rhythmic power (the poem has already been quoted); the more intricate rhyme formula of *In a Year*—*abcbdc*—requiring, in combination with the short lines, extraordinary skill to keep sense and metre going smoothly;

*Never any more  
While I live  
Need I hope to see his face  
As before.  
Once his love grown chill  
Mine may strive:  
Bitterly we re-embrace  
Single still:*

complete success is achieved but the result is doubtless brilliant rather than beautiful. Of longer poems, *Abt Vogler* has a line with an organ-like roll and a straightforward rhyme-scheme; and *Rabbi Ben Ezra* a most original stanza form, with the two long lines—even the final Alexandrine—growing with beautiful naturalness out of the shorter ones. And there are long and complicated stanzas, like that of *Too Late*, with its twelve tetrameters rhyming *ababdefefcd*—a more symmetrical elaboration of the stanza used earlier for *The Last Ride Together*, which has eleven tetrameters rhyming *aabbcddeec*. One might notice the different effect gained from the alternation of long and short lines in *A Grammarian's Funeral* from that we observed in *Love among the Ruins*—for the quiet echo we now have one that is brisk and meaningful, as

<sup>1</sup> How ears differ! 'The almost insufferable jingle of *Love Among the Ruins*.' G. E. Hadow.

of marching men; the dreadful force of the repeated last lines in each stanza of *The Heretic's Tragedy*; and the noble strength of the rough-hewn form of the final *Epilogue*—the single rhyme coming in the short last line, but the double-endings of the other three lines producing an effect of rhyme:

*At the midnight in the silence of the sleep-time,  
When you set your fancies free,  
Will they pass to where—by death, fools think imprisoned—  
Low he lies who once so loved you, whom you loved so,  
—Pity me?*

It would be a task of much delight to examine the forms of the great number of radically different stanzas employed by Browning, but the task may be left to the interested reader, who will find, I believe, only one complete failure, the terrible stanza adopted for the very late poem, *Pietro of Abano*, where the mixture of metres, all clumsy, makes the poem almost impossible to read—a small lapse to be set against scores of poems in which the verse-form is brilliantly carried through without a flaw. And yet I get the impression that Browning was not interested in stanza-form for its own sake. I called the *Too Late* stanza an 'elaboration' of the stanza of *The Last Ride*, but it is improbable that Browning based the one on the other. Tennyson, having devised a beautiful stanza for *The Poet*, with lines of 5, 3, 5, 2 iambic feet rhyming abab, played two deliberate variations on it for *The Palace of Art* (5, 4, 5, 3 feet) and *A Dream of Fair Women* (5, 5, 5, 3). I cannot imagine Browning doing anything so 'artistic'. The feeling I have about his verse forms is that each one was suggested spontaneously to him by the way the first words of his thought came to him. All the opening stanzas quoted above suggest this kind of speech-inspiration, and numerous others do the same:

*That fawn-skin dappled hair of hers—*

(with this for first line, a succession of triple rhymes becomes necessary, but this presented no difficulty to Browning)—

*So far as my story approaches its end,  
Which do you pity the most of us three . . . ?*

No protesting, Dearest,  
· Hardly kisses even!  
Don't we both know how it ends?

(a simple conversational opening, converted into a delicious stanza by its completion, with the effective variation)—

How the greenest leaf turns serest?  
Bluest outbreak—blankest heaven?  
Lovers—friends?

On the sea and at the Hogue, sixteen hundred ninety two,  
Did the English fight the French—woe to France!

(a statement that might almost have come out of a history book, but it sets the admirable form of the poem that follows). Even the brilliantly successful stanza of *Rabbi Ben Ezra* would seem to have arisen in this way: the first three lines are an exquisitely plain statement of what the poet wanted to say:

Grow old along with me!  
The best is yet to be,  
The last of life for which the first was made.

This has only to be repeated, like a musical subject, to give a perfect stanza, but by a touch of special inspiration Browning put a pleonastic 'trust God' into the last line and made the stanza-form unique:

Our times are in His hand  
Who saith, 'A whole I planned:  
Youth shows but half: trust God; see all, nor be afraid.'

With most poets there is evidence of conscious design in the building up of form. That Browning at least had the theory of the way of composition may be deduced from a lovely passage in *Pauline*:

as I in dream have seen  
Music wait on a lyrist for some thought,  
Yet singing to herself until it came.

It was so that such openings as these must have come:

*Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean . . .*

*She dwelt among the untrodden ways, . . .*

*There be none of Beauty's daughters . . .*

*Oh what can ail thee, knight-at-arms . . .*

*The sky was like a water-drop  
In shadow of a thorn. . . .*

*Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore . . .*

*Gather ye rose-buds while ye may . . .*

*Yet once more, O ye laurels, and once more . . .*

But Browning more often *spoke* his initial thought, and trusted to his virtuosity to make it sing in his degree.

The feature is a part of his great gift in colloquial verse, and I am not prepared to say which is more 'poetic'—that stanza-form should be deliberately fashioned to take the thought or should arise spontaneously out of it. But Browning's habit seems to support the suggestion that he was more interested in content than in form, even though his success in the latter was, in a technical aspect, complete. Tennyson's 1830 volume consisted largely of exercises in form; Browning plunged straight into performances of massive feeling and thought in which form plays a minor part. He hardly touched the sonnet, and never dreamed of employing stanzas so artificially contrived as the Spenserian, or those of Keats's *Odes* or Arnold's *Thyrsis* (avoiding them not because they were difficult but because they were artificial. The stanzas of *The Worst of It* and *The Last Ride* are difficult but natural); his rare experiments in irregular form (except perhaps in *The Pied Piper*) do not show any of the loving precision with which Arnold fashioned such poems as *The Future* and *Dover Beach*, where the form is so delicately fitted to the feeling that the poems seem to be built with the exactness of a formal ode.

Browning was a brilliant, an all too brilliant, rhymers. He could do everything with rhyme except hold it in check. I have already damned him sufficiently for his excesses in double and triple rhymes. In the right

place, which is humorous verse, his expert juggling in this kind is hugely enjoyable, notably in *Pacchiarotto*: how he must have chuckled over

*While, treading down rose and ranunculus,  
You Tommy-make-room-for-your-Uncle us!  
Troop, all of you, man or homunculus.*

Moreover, while Elizabeth will cheerfully rhyme 'poems' with 'flow-ings', 'admiring' with 'iron', 'coming' with 'woman', her husband's dexterity was such that he never, I think, perpetrated a rhyme that could not be, at a pinch, justified. For extending the trick to serious poetry Browning deserved, as Ben Jonson would say, hanging. It is only by using even double rhyme rarely that it can be used effectively, as Keats used it in the third stanza of the *Ode to Melancholy*. But Browning was not quite sane where rhyme was concerned. Think of that painful effort, *Through the Metidja*—forty lines all rhyming with 'ride', and ten of them having an internal rhyme on the same syllable. It is perfectly successful, and perfectly horrid. (In moderation, as in the seven lines of *Home Thoughts from the Sea*, the thing comes off beautifully.) Again, *Dís aliter visum* has led off with one of the colloquial openings:

*Stop, let me have the truth of that!  
Is that all true? I say, the day  
Ten years ago . . .*

He notices that there is a touch of internal rhyme, quite accidental, in the second line, and decides to carry it through; so the whole thirty stanzas must have their second lines ending with such locutions as 'let me get', 'pass, alas', 'took our look', 'pooh, cry you'.

However, the superabundant skill ensures that the handling of single rhyme is beyond praise: the rhyme is always at hand to carry the conception—except for an occasional lapse in the later years. Almost always with Browning, as with all true poets, rhyme is an integral part of the sense, but I don't think it often inspires him, as it certainly does the great artists in language. The call of a rhyme for 'intenser' in *A Grammarian's Funeral* gave us the wonderful metaphor of man's thought 'chafing in the censer'; and another for 'rocket' produced the 'frantic astronomical image'—'Do I carry the moon in my pocket?'—which so delighted

Chesterton in *Master Hugues*. That beautiful but dubious poem, *Fears and Scruples*, provides some critical instances, with its single and double rhymes managed irreproachably on the whole, and not seldom lending inspiration—certainly in the first and fourth stanzas, and notably in the ninth:

*All my days, I'll go the softlier, sadlier,  
For that dream's sake! How forgot the thrill  
Through and through me as I thought, 'The gladlier  
Lives my friend because I love him still!'*

But the admirable first line of the seventh stanza—'I can simply wish I might refute you', is paired with a most uncalled for 'you brute, you!' And I have already suggested that the temptation of rhyme spoiled the logic of the conclusion. But in the main Browning's easy mastery of rhyme is remarkable: through the heavy weather of *Sordello* the couplets glitter like stars.

We gather from one of Elizabeth's letters of 1845 that Robert had spoken somewhat disparagingly of Tennyson's blank verse: 'I seem to hear', she writes, 'more in (Tennyson's) blank verse than you do.' The blank verse Browning had written before 1845 gave him no right to criticize Tennyson. Neither in *Pauline* nor in *Paracelsus* does the verse ever move the reader with that 'linked music' which Elizabeth heard, as all must hear, in *Enone* and the *Morte D'Arthur*. The lyrical blank verse of *Pauline* (illustrated above) comes nearer to it than the strong but commonplace medium of *Paracelsus*:

*And since that morn all life has been forgotten:  
All is one day, one only step between  
'The outset and the end: one tyrant all-  
Absorbing aim fills up the interspace.*

As Saintsbury says, this is oddly like prose—and I would add that the eloquent, fiery, endless prose of the *Letters* is oddly like the verse of *Paracelsus*. But whenever one of the rare passages of feeling or natural description comes along, there is a rise to genuine beauty. Some instances were given in the discussion of *Paracelsus* in an earlier chapter.

Browning's own speciality in blank verse, the perfect blending of the iambic line with the diction and modulation of common easy speech,

was yet to come. He gave us a satisfying sample in *The Bishop's Tomb*; others followed in *Karshish*, *Blougram*, *In a Balcony*, *Sludge* and *A Death in the Desert*. And then came the climax of this side of his art, *The Ring and the Book* and *Balaustion's Adventure*. It had to be so: Browning's blank-verse genius had to be for a colloquial species, because these, his two masterpieces of blank verse, as well as most of the minor works in that form, are entirely made up of the spoken word. He has no great 'narrative' poems in blank verse, like those of Milton and Keats and Tennyson: all are 'dramatic', in being told conversationally by the characters themselves. The purpose sets the manner. It is in the measured tone of epic narrative that the *Idylls of the King* begin:

*Leodogran, the king of Cameliard,*  
*Had one fair daughter, and none other child;*  
*And she was fairest of all flesh on earth,*  
*Guinevere, and in her his one delight;*

or, if we go back to the *Morte*:

*So all day long the noise of battle rolled*  
*Among the mountains by the winter sea . . .*

The opening of *The Ring and the Book* is in the manner of familiar though excellent conversation:

*Do you see this Ring?*  
*'Tis Rome-work, made to match*  
*(By Castellani's imitative craft)*  
*Etrurian circlets found, some happy morn,*  
*After a dropping April;*

how admirable it is; how impossible to do unless you are born with the gift; and how easy for it to slide into bad taste (as the Tennysonian kind into insipidity).

This, and the fact that Browning's blank verse is not always himself speaking—it is at least differentiated for Pompilia—I think these are the only things worth while saying about it. It includes all that could be said about details of verse-structure—that there is infinite variation, caesura at any or no point in the line, inversion or lengthening of any of

the five feet, the spondee frequent and enjambment constant. It includes also the implication that poor lines are unavoidable—lines like

*Guido and Franceschini: a Count—ay;  
A lure-owl posturing to attract birds;  
Every day and all day long, just my wife*

(this last defines scansion); as well as lines which though not bad are extraordinarily irregular:

*That I liked, that was the best thing she said;  
Went falteringly against Syracuse.*

The study of Browning's metres would require a volume to itself. Hardly two poems are metrically alike. He uses iambs, trochees, anapæsts, dactyls and spondees alone or in combination, in lines of from two to eight feet, and in stanzas of from two to twelve lines.<sup>1</sup> And always, I think, he convinces you that the chosen metrical arrangement is the appropriate one for the poem. I can only instance a few poems which seem to me metrically successful, though not necessarily more so than scores of others (comment of this kind has already been made on some poems—*Love among the Ruins*, *The Worst of It, Too Late*, *Hervé Riel*, *Rabbi Ben Ezra*).

The five-foot anapæstic couplets of *Saul* are perhaps the closest approximation to the melodious parallelism of the Hebrew psalms that could be invented. The line can soften to lyric:

*And the sleep in the dried river-channel where bulrushes tell  
That the water was wont to go warbling so softly and well*

—or stiffen to the oracular:

*I spoke as I saw:  
Reported, as man may of God's work, all's love yet all's law.*

Three times in the early part of the poem an impressive pause is secured by the dropping of a foot:

<sup>1</sup> I don't believe in the other kinds of feet—amphibrachs and worse; in English verse they can always be resolved into the five given.



*But I stopped here, for here in the darkness . . . Saul groaned.*

The lesser composers write pieces which aim to present the musical idea of the thing named in the title (there is a composition by Croft Jackson on *Oysters*). 'If ever a verse-form was designed to represent a pretty woman it is this:

*That fawn-skin dappled hair of hers,  
And the blue eye  
Dear and dewy,  
And that infantine fresh air of hers!*

The wayward trochaic metre, the pretty weightless stanzas—they float out like bubbles from a pipe. It is a pity he went beyond the delicious seventh stanza:

*So, we leave the sweet face fondly there.  
Be its beauty  
Its sole duty!  
Let all hope of grace beyond, lie there!*

That was final—that is ultimate wisdom; but he went on to 'ponder a conclusion', and rather let the delicate thing down.

The mournful dactyls of *The Lost Leader* are appropriate to the somewhat maudlin and self-righteous reproaches that make up the poem. How well, in contrast, does the anapæstic lilt of the *Toccata* (though it has a trochaic base)<sup>1</sup> express the melancholy of the mingled music and memory; the colloquial manner is here in perfection:

*What? those lesser thirds so plaintive, sixths diminished, sigh on sigh,  
Told them something? Those suspensions, those solutions—'Must we die?'  
Those commiserating sevenths—'Life might last! we can but try!'*

*Evelyn Hope* is written ostensibly in iambics, but the variations create a charm of metre equal to that of the subject. It begins with a light dactylic effect:

*Be'autiful | Ev'lyn | Hópe is | deád;*

<sup>1</sup> Browning uses the trochee more than most poets. Besides three or four noted there are *Fears and Scruples*, *One Word More*, *In a Year*, *A Woman's Last Word*.

turns trochaic:

*Sít and | wáтч by hě́r | síde an | hóur;*

becomes mainly iambic in the fourth line:

*That is her book-shelf, this her bed;*

*She plucked | that píece | of gě́rú | níum-flówer;*

has an effective break in the next line:

*Beginning to die || too, in the glass;*

and the stanza ends in lines mainly iambic again, but with some of Browning's characteristic spondees:

*Little has yet been changed, I think;  
The shutters are shut, no light may pass  
Save two | long rays | through the hing | es chink.<sup>1</sup>*

The same metre and stanza are used for *The Flower's Name*, the variations being fewer with a soberer effect, for the more sedate, less fanciful situation. Iambic pentameter, used with little variation and with a close-wrapped rhyme-scheme—abbaac, gives an effect, in *Childe Roland*, of narrative moving in solid blocks.

*Fifine at the Fair*, with its prologue and epilogue, is a prosodic study in itself. I have already spoken of the intractable Alexandrines in couplets which Browning dragoons into serving his controversial purpose in the body of the poem. He allows an occasional variation in the form of a triplet with the third line a fourteenner. The prologue, *Amphibian*, is the neatest bit of workmanship imaginable. It moves forward, a line at a time, quietly filling its little pools of verse—

*I lay and looked at the sun,  
The noon-sun looked at me:  
Between us two, no one  
Live creature, that I could see*

<sup>1</sup> There is a grand spondaic line in *James Lee's Wife*: 'On his sòul's hānds' pālms òne fāi gòod wíse thíng'; and another in *A Death in the Desert*: 'What Does, what Knows, what Is: thíce sòuls, òne mán.'

—quickenings with anapæsts when the fanciful argument enters—

*By passion and thought upborne,  
One smiles to one self,—‘They fare  
Scarce better, they need not scorn  
Our sea, who live in the air!’*

—then sinking back to the pacing narrative. And all the time the rhyme follows through, as exact in sense as in sound. The poem is a model for this kind of ‘amphibious’ poetry, an intellectual idea expressed in verse that delights both eye and ear.

The *Householder’s* epilogue is quite another story. By the time Browning had finished wrestling with *Fifine* he must have been brimming with feeling, to which he gave intense imaginative expression in a form which was a supreme vehicle of feeling. It would be a mistake to scan the lines: they are made up of trochees, dactyls and spondee, but depend almost entirely upon stress; the eight lines produce an effect of equality, but take 7, 5, 4, 5, 5, 5, 4, 7 stresses. The poem is the exact opposite of *Amphibian*, being one of Browning’s rare instances of a verse-form inducing the full lyric transport.

*By the Fire-side* has a metrical form which is part of the supreme inspiration behind the poem. It is one of the poems where the stanza-form was set by the shape of the initial thought:

*How well I know what I mean to do  
When the long dark autumn-evenings come . . .*

How plain and unpremeditated. Yet what a perfect musical theme for a composition. It is repeated, rounded off by a line of three instead of four iambs, and there is your poem in little

*And where, my soul, is thy pleasant hue?  
With the music of all thy voices, dumb  
In life’s November too!*

The simple metre bends to the varying moods of the poem, and the short last line is always there to express a finality:

*But that is its own affair;  
Mutely, my heart knows how;  
But a last leaf, fear to touch.*

Here was art, restraint, conscious beauty at its highest. As a general rule the metrical art was *not* conscious. I think Browning played entirely by ear, and am supported in the belief by the fact that when Furnivall asked him how *Hervé Riel* was to be read he sent the first two lines scanned wrongly!<sup>1</sup>

It is indicative of something in Browning's art, or of something lacking in it, that it does not often produce 'the great line'. Arnold somewhere gives us a handful of such lines from Shakespeare ('Absent thee from felicity awhile'), Dante and other poets, suggesting that they should be used as tests, touchstones, of poetry. Such 'jewels', as Tennyson called them, could be abstracted from the word-vesture of any of the great English poets: it is with some difficulty that any can be found in Browning to match certainly with the others. The lines now given represent my culling for this specific purpose.

*God must be glad one loves his world so much.*  
(*Pippa Passes*)

*In His face  
Is light, but in His shadow healing too.*  
(*Pompilia*)

*This grey ultimate decrepitude.*  
(*The Pope*)

*Who knows but the world may end to-night?*  
(*Last Ride*)

*How soon a smile of God can change the world.*  
(*In a Balcony*)

<sup>1</sup> Here I must hand the reader over to the more expert hands of George Saintsbury (*History of English Prose*, vol. III, pp. 216-40), especially for his analysis of the fascinating sequence of metrical achievements in James Lee's *Wife*. It will be seen that he and I are not quite at one: he admires *Metidja*, which to me is the crackling of thorns, and places *The Last Ride* metrically 'above everything else of its author's'. But I hope I have said enough to retute the critics who said Browning 'neglected form'. 'They accuse me', said Browning, of 'not taking pains: I take nothing but pains'.

*Ah! but a man's reach should exceed his grasp—  
Or what's a heaven for?*

*(Andrea del Sarto)*

*The world's no blot nor blank:  
To me it means intensely, and means good.*

*(Fra Lippo Lippi)*

*Be happy! Add but the other grace,  
Be good!*

*(The Worst of It)*

*O moment, one and infinite!*

*(By the Fire-side)*

*He said. What's Time? Leave Now for dogs and apes!,  
Man has Forever!*

*(Grammarian's Funeral)*

*O good gigantic smile o' the brown old earth!*

*(James Lee's Wife)*

*That out of three sounds he frame, not a fourth sound but a star.*

*(Abt Vogler)*

*Infinite passion and the pain  
Of finite hearts that yearn.*

*(Two in the Campagna)*

*What's midnight's doubt before the dayspring's faith?*

*(Bishop Blougram)*

*Greek endings, each the little passing-bell  
That signifies some faith's about to die.*

*(Bishop Blougram)*

*A solitary great man's worth the world.*

*(Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau)*

I am afraid few, if any, of these have that grace of form which alone can make the jewel of words 'sparkle for ever'. Out of their context they read, as Mr Osbert Burdett says, like plain prose sentences. Browning will condense an emotional situation or a state of mind into a line or two, but not often in memorable shape. Few human thoughts are im-

mortal in themselves: only immortal form can give them immortality:  
*Sunt lachrymae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt.*

Rhythmic form, which is the ultimate justification of metre; rhythmic form, which, like music, has an effect of transport of an almost physical nature, disturbing—some say the soul and others the nervous system: rhythmic form is not found much in Browning. He said, 'I can write music', but he only meant verse which was not harsh, and most of his shorter poems bear him out to this extent. But the poetic impulse must be born very deep down in the being, and come forth in perfect artistic shape, before the emotional or spiritual response is achieved, and neither of these conditions was often fulfilled with Browning. The thing appears to me to happen in parts of *Pauline* and of the *Caponsacchi* and the *Pompilia*; in *By the Fire-side* and *Love among the Ruins*, and some of the poems of *James Lee's Wife*—and I think nowhere else. But this subtle and profound verse-movement, with its resultant movement of the spirit, is much out of favour to-day, and I will say no more about it here.

Browning was in too much of a hurry to concern himself closely with diction. He had no Wordsworthian theories, and his colloquialism was less a matter of diction than of sentence-structure. When his thought was beautiful, as it often was, it had to walk by its own light, for he ignored Longinus's aphorism, 'beautiful words are the very light of thought'. On the other hand his diction might have come under Dante's classification of the only words suitable for 'illustrious' poetry—namely those which are 'urban virile', and of these only those which are either 'combed or shaggy'. When you have said *shaggy urban virile* you have said all that needs to be said about Browning's diction (*combed* seems to mean words long enough to have a melody of their own, and Browning can bring these also into use: 'Its soft meandering Spanish name.') However, we cannot leave it at that.<sup>1</sup>

Browning had a very good ear for metre and stanza-form, but none whatever where diction was concerned, otherwise he would never have passed words like *beauteousest*, *irreligiousest*, *griefful*. He was not a conscious artist, and his vocabulary is entirely non-selective. He probably read Greek more than any other major poet, but he had no classical training, so that there was nothing to curb his effusiveness. His use of

poetically beautiful words is accidental: if the metre or the rhyme suggests such a word, it is used, if otherwise, so. In *St Martin's Summer*, the unpoetic words 'absurder' and 'jocoser' are allowed because they fill a rhyme. Most poets love certain words as they love flowers or children—to Browning one is as good as another. He joined Keats in 'looking upon fine phrases like a lover' only in respect of figures, and even here he would let pass (in *Pauline*) such an ugly thing as

a great cloud floats laden  
With light, like a dead whale that white birds pick.

His facility was such that he could fulfil every requirement, and was indifferent if sometimes he fulfilled it badly: in *Too Late* he hurriedly accepts 'pounce' as a rhyme for 'pronounce', making the lady's hand like 'the pounce Of a scaly-footed hawk', and elsewhere 'the same exigency makes the soul 'bounce' from the body'. Of course when he is cascading his double and triple rhymes, any words, existent or non-existent, will do—*grudgment*, *disembowelling*, *tuntacks*. But it must be admitted that in the lyrics of the best period these lapses are rare. He is greatly successful in adapting his vocabulary to his subject: the words used in *The Bishop orders his Tomb* and in *The Epistle* are just those required to achieve the colour and atmosphere of the poems, and the vocabulary of Caponsacchi, Pompilia and Blougram is in each case appropriate to the speaker.<sup>1</sup> But this is not the result of artistic choice, but of Browning's dramatic power of identifying himself with each of his figures in turn. His reading—in Johnson's dictionary and elsewhere—together with his tenacious memory, supplied him with stores of unusual words, and he threw them in here and there regardless—*novercal*, *decrassify*, *baladine*, *probatively*, *omoplat*, *rutilant*. . .

I have not been able to discover which is Browning's favourite word, but he makes certain words work hard—*infinite* (and its derivatives) with three times the frequency of Tennyson, *God* more than twice, *soul* much more than twice, *reason* five times, *miracle* three times. *Probation*. Browning's own word, used twenty-four times, is not found in Tennyson at all, and only once in Wordsworth.<sup>1</sup>

Browning is as far as possible from being 'the poets' poet'. De Reul suggests that his practice reverses Pope's definition of art, 'What oft was

<sup>1</sup> Allowance has been made for the fact that the amount of Browning's writing is nearly three times as large as Tennyson's.

thought but ne'er so well expressed'. No one ever loved him for the sake of the beauty of his language. But colloquialism can give the most charming results, as in *The Lost Mistress*, or the conclusion of *The Guardian-Angel*:

My love is here—where are you, dear old friend?  
How rolls the Wairoa at your world's fur end?  
This is Ancona, yonder is the sea;

and some of his most unforgettable and imaginative truths have been expressed in the simplest words, as the ending of the great moon-metaphor in *One Word more*:

God be thanked, the meanest of his creatures  
Boasts two soul-sides, one to face the world with,  
One to show a woman when he loves her!

### 3

Goethe, in one of his *Reflections*, says something to the effect that poetry dealing 'more with the emotions and feelings of the inner life than with the general aspect of the great life of the world' is likely to be 'devoid of figures of speech'. This seems somewhat unduly to limit the usefulness of figurative language, and just as Goethe died Browning stood forth to disprove the judgment, as indeed the 'metaphysical poets' had done long before. Aristotle's association of the poetic gift with skill in metaphor does not imply any limitation to objective poetry.

Browning's poetry is very rich in metaphor, and only less rich in the simile. Moreover, a reasonable proportion of his figures are genuinely illuminating, not merely descriptive, and grow organically out of the subject. How much we understand as well as see when the court-room in *The Ring and the Book* is thus interpreted:

There stands he,  
While the same grim black-panelled chamber blinks  
As though rubbed shiny with the sins of Rome  
Told the same oak for ages—wave-washed wall  
Whereto has set a sea of wickedness.



Caponsacchi has a good image for the nature and process of close thinking:

*I have thought sometimes, and thought long and hard.  
I have stood before, gone round a serious thing,  
Tasked my whole mind to touch and clasp it close,  
As I stretch forth my arm to touch this bar.*

In *Christmas-Eve* the difference between power and love is illustrated: power is a thing that can be increased by the use of machines, but love is like a head of water—its force can be used but neither created nor increased.

*But love is the ever-springing fountain:  
Man may enlarge or narrow his bed  
For the water's play, but the water-head—  
How can he multiply or reduce it?  
As easy create it as cause it to cease . .*

The brilliant analogy by which Browning showed what a chance meeting with Shelley would have meant to him—crossing the moor and picking up an eagle's feather—is too well known to need quoting at length. A short figure, but most vivid and powerful, is in *The Worst of It*. The lover fears a blow will fall on the woman who has betrayed him: it will come in the shape of an agony of remorse—for what she has done to him:

*I am called at last,  
When the devil stabs you, to lend the knife.*

*Dis aliter visum* has a metaphor which shows in a flash what it is to be a lover of poetry: the lady is said to love good verse:

*much as we  
Down at the bath-house love the sea . . .  
While, do but follow the fishing-gull  
That flaps and floats from cave to cave!  
There's the sea-lover.*

Sludge declares that his clients were sometimes awakened to religion by his performances:

*Ridding us of their whole life's gathered straws  
By a live coal from the altar.*

And what dreadful force there is in the analogy used by Ottima for the lightning that burned at her and Sebald through the trees:

*As if God's messenger through the close wood screen  
Plunged and re-plunged his weapon at a venture  
Feeling for guilty thee and me . . .*

Later in *Pippa* is an altogether lovely image, where Jules is assessing the effect on his Phene of Pippa's last song:

*Look at the woman here with the new soul,  
. . . fresh upon her lips  
Alit, the visionary butterfly,  
Waiting my word to enter and make bright,  
Or flutter off and leave all blank as first.*

And there is the marvellous analogy that closes Book I of *Paracelsus*:

*Are there not, Festus, are there not, dear Michal,  
Two points in the adventure of the diver,  
One—when, a beggar, he prepares to plunge,  
One—when, a prince, he rises with his pearl?  
Festus, I plunge!*

Browning thought in metaphor, and needed the simile less. I find his similes generally beautiful and interesting but not more than descriptive. In *Pauline* the blackthorn boughs

*were white with coming buds,  
Like the bright side of a sorrow;*

and there is a lonely pool in the forest:

*the trees bend  
O'er it as wild men watch a sleeping girl.*

There are two wonderful sunset similes in *Paracelsus* and *Sordello*: the first shows the sun going down on Constantinople:

*Behind the arm of the city, which between,  
With all that length of domes and minarets,  
Athwart the splendour, black and crooked runs  
Like a Turk verse along a scimitar.*

In the other it is Verona we are shown, with appropriate change of imagery:

*A last remains of sunset dimly burned  
O'er the far forest, like a torch-flame turned  
By the wind back upon its bearer's hand  
In one long flare of crimson; as a brand  
The woods beneath lay black.*

I believe Browning makes more use of the extended simile than any other poet except Milton and Arnold. It will be impossible to quote more than one or two of them. He led off with one of the longest in *Pauline*, where he compares his experience of her to the discovery of a spring which turns into a great river. I quoted part of this in Chapter II, and it goes on with a vast deal of beautiful and inessential detail for another dozen lines. A shorter one on autumn was quoted recently (p. 258). In *Sordello* Browning amuses himself imaginatively by making the young poet indulge 'an interval of vain discursive thought':

*As, shall I say, some Ethiopie past pursuit  
Of all enslavers, dips a shackled foot,*

and goes on (the Ethiopie) dreaming of his home and his enemies to the length of twenty-two lines. There are others in *Balaustion*, *Fifine*, and *Red Cotton Country*, and one of the best (an extended metaphor) in *Too Late*:

*But, Edith dead! no doubting more!  
 I used to sit and look at my life  
 As it rippled and ran, till, right before,  
 A great stone stopped it: O, the strife  
 Of waves at the stone some devil threw  
 In my life's mid current, thwarting God.*

*But either I thought, 'They may churn and chide  
 Awhile,—my waves which came for their joy  
 And found this horrible stone full-tide:  
 Yet I see just a thread escape, deploy  
 Through the evening-country, silent and safe,  
 And it suffers no more till it finds 'he'sea.'  
 Or else I would think, 'Perhaps some night  
 When new things happen, a meteor-ball  
 May slip through the sky in a line of light,  
 And earth breathe hard, and landmarks fall,  
 And my waves no longer champ nor chafe,  
 Since a stone will have rolled from its place: let be!'*

There are numbers of metaphors merely descriptive but full of interest. Of Violante's adoption of the prostitute's child we read:

*This fragile egg some careless wild bird dropped  
 She had picked up where it waited the footfall  
 And put in her own breast till forth broke finch  
 Able to sing God's praise on morning's now.*

In her own book Pompilia describes the same operation as that of plucking a bud at a wild briar's end to keep it out of the way of wild beasts. To others her coming suggests a less simple flower-image:

*The strange tall pale beautiful creature grown  
 Lily-like out o' the cleft i' the sun-smit rock.*

Guido, just before the end, has a powerful figure for his state of mind:

*Come, I am tired of silence! Pause enough!  
 You have prayed: I have gone inside my soul  
 And shut its door behind me: 'tis your torch  
 Makes the place dark . . .*

*By the Fire-side* has many effective figures, such as the November colour on the creeper's leaf:

*Like a splash of blood, intense, abrupt,  
O'er a shield else gold from rim to boss.*

But finest, and most profound in meaning, is the personification of the natural scene as having effected the union of the lovers' souls:

*The forests had done it; there they stood;  
We caught for a moment the powers at play:  
They had mingled us so, for once and good,  
Their work was done—we might go or stay,  
They relapsed to their ancient mood.*

Blougram's amplified metaphor of the voyage of life and its cabin furniture will be remembered. Browning is fond of figures drawn from the sea, as also of a house image for the body or bodily life.

It is a sign of the difference between Tennyson's highly conscious art and Browning's naïver genius that whereas Tennyson is rich in onomatopœia, Browning hardly ever attempts this effect. Attention has already been drawn to the only two instances I have observed—the impression of organ music in the opening stanzas of *Abt Vogler*, and a simple case in *Paracelsus*:

*Like an asp  
The wind slips whispering from bough to bough*

I suppose to this might be added from *James Lee*—'Hark, the wind with its wants and its infinite wail', and the elaboration of this in the V poem (but these are mental rather than sound impressions). Besides these, and the admirable but primitive sound-picture of the coming of the rats in the *Pied Piper*, I remember nothing. Onomatopœia is not highly regarded by critics, being felt to be rather like programme-music.

But Browning's signature tune is alliteration, which he uses more than any other poet (since the fourteenth century) and sometimes overdoes. The habit grew upon him, and was not fully formed till *The Ring and the Book*. Before that alliteration played a normal part in his writing. The lines quoted above from *Paracelsus*, about the preparation and the

plunge, the pearl and the prince, showed he was not afraid of it, and once or twice in *Men and Women* he is a little too emphatic, as when the moon in *Karshish* rises:

*A moon made like a face with certain spots,  
Multiform, manifold and menacing,*

or Constance talks about their stealing out 'So wickedly, so wildly and so well' But with *The Ring and the Book* it became almost a mannerism, like Chesterton's duplications. It comes over him like a storm sometimes: see how the 'd' sets Guido off here, with 'b's and 'p's caught up in the swirl

*Through the deed  
Of a diav and a rogue, it is bye-blow, bastard-babe  
Of a nameless stumpeet, cast off, palmed on me  
As the daughter with the downy Daughter? Dnt  
O' the kennel! Downy? Dust o' the street! Nought more*

Over-obvious again, though otherwise unobjectionable, is this in *Red Cotton Country*

*Quick to the quest, then—forward, the firm foot!  
Omn ird, the quarry-overtaking eye!*

On the other hand alliteration sometimes inspires, like rhyme: the 'l's, 'p's, g's and 's's do so here

*What though th' earlier grooves  
That rang the laughing loes  
Around thy bise no longer pause and press?  
What though, about thy rim,  
Skull thumps in order grim  
Grow out, in graver mood, obey the sterner stress?*

They call Browning 'rugged', though he is smooth and gracious as a College lawn in many of the lyrics. Chesterton said he 'stuttered', and others have called his style laboured. I must say this is not apparent to me. *Sordello* always excepted, he wrote with an ease which is proved by

the short time of composition and results in the often headlong pace of his verse. (A quite admirable sonnet to Goldoni was written while a messenger waited at the door.) His colloquial style generally precluded artistic beauty, but roughness and vigour of diction flowed from his personality and were in no wise the product of labour. In the earlier long poems, while he was under the influence of the Romantics, the verse moves as smoothly as its heavy context will allow: when these influences were shaken off the style became violently idiomatic, but the idiom was natural to the man, and smoothness was replaced by a swiftness that knocks a little. His style always rises—or loses its angularities—when a passage of nature-description is at hand, and some of his most admirable figures are used to light up his landscapes. In the Epilogue to *Pacchiarotto* he deals with the critics' complaint that he is 'strong but not sweet'. Sweetness will come with time, he suggests, and declares that the wine which pours from him shall be laced with 'spirit at proof, I promise that!' He calls himself a diamond-mine beneath a moor, needing spade-work to find. He is sometimes compared to Donne, but I think the chief likeness is that in both a strong originality of thought is clothed in an often graceless form, though Donne has a habitual conciseness which is rare in Browning, who lacks also the economy and clarity of the Augustans. The restraints and discipline of art are almost completely unknown to Browning. But restraint has counted for less since Roy Campbell produced his epigrammatic lines on certain writers of the opposite kind (I quote from memory):

*We admire their tact and their restraint—  
Discretion, too, of course;  
They use the snaffle and bit all right—  
But where's the bloody horse?*

All the same, there is one region of style in which Browning's readers would have been glad to see the 'snaffle and bit' brought into use. I have referred to it more than once as garrulousness. Mr Osbert Burdett, using the equivalent term 'prolixity', points out that this is by no means the same vice as verbosity. It is said that it was an accusation of verbosity in *Paracelsus* that induced Browning to write *Sordello* in a sort of pre-stressed concrete, without modifying his loquacity. The feature is difficult to illustrate, but early in Book V he wants to say that *Sordello* realized that it would be sufficient if he took the one step of persuading

Salinguerra to join the Guelfs and left the rest of his programme to God. He gets this over in thirteen lines, but goes on elaborating the point for another 250. The shorter poems, blank verse and other, never err this way, and are models of directness. But in all the books of *The Ring and the Book* (except the *Pompilia*) and in most of the other long poems this inability to stop talking occasionally taxes the patience. It is not in *this* way that Keats meant that a poet should 'surprise by a fine excess'.<sup>1</sup>

Browning was, as Mr Bernard Groom says, one of the 'impulsive poets', and this partly accounts for his lack of critical judgment. It does not much matter that you write in a hurry (if that suits your habit of composition), provided you have taste to correct the lapses from perfection which the method entails. Browning had not, and let things stand, once written, which are simply puzzling because his mastery of language was so great that one knows he could have brought them up to scratch had he perceived the weakness. Consider that grand little poem which begins, 'Ah, did you once see Shelley plain?'<sup>1</sup> It is so good that I find the imperfections of the second stanza quite maddening. Surely that 'also' in the second line is feeble. And then

*And the memory I started at —  
My starting moves you laughter*

Did anyone ever 'start' at a memory? And if one did, is it possible to imagine a 'start' so violent as to move the onlooker to laughter? The explanation lies partly in the necessity to rhyme with *after*. But having found that this led to an absurdity, Browning should have recast the second line, removing the schoolboy 'also', and providing a more hopeful rhyme-ending. As for instance

*But you were living before that,  
And after it your life went on,  
Just such a memory comes pat  
Out of a day that's gone*

But there is more behind. Browning told W. H. Kingsland he was one day in Hodgson's when a stranger came in and, talking to Hodgson,

<sup>1</sup> You can still see Shelley Plain. I saw it myself this summer. It is a square mile of tangle carved out of the woodland on the outskirts of St Leonard's Forest in Hilary, Belloc's Sussex.



spoke of something Shelley had once said to him. 'He saw me staring at him, and burst out laughing'. Now the odd thing is that *staring* may move laughter; but 'staring' could not be worked into the verse without explanation; so it was modified to 'starting'. It should have been dropped, and with it the obtrusive laughter.

I have already expressed a similar fretfulness over *A Likeness*, which, but for its rhymes, might have been a morsel to tickle the palate of Apollo. Beyond this I think Browning's lapses are matters of minor carelessness. Why did he leave two lines in *The Ring and the Book* short of a foot?

*Till Rome, that Rome whereof—this voice* (IX, 724);

*Bids Law—'Be damned!' adds Gospel,—nay* (XI, 1783)

(this can be read correctly by understanding a silent unstressed syllable before each of *Bids* and *Law*). Why, again, with his rhyming skill, did he leave false rhymes in *St Martin's Summer* (*lied* and *disguised*) and *James Lee's Wife* (*V* (*fire* and *fly*))? It was a bad oversight to use the word 'prodigious' in *Karshish* twice within eight lines, and a third time a hundred lines further on.

And what are we to say about Browning's split infinitives? One has to remember that the historical fact about the nature of the verb—that the *to* is as inseparable as the *ing* of the participle—was not settled until well into the twentieth century, so that writers who lacked the daintier linguistic touch (Hardy was another) felt no compunction in effecting the disjuncture. Some of Browning's examples are simply unnecessary

*Without help, make shift to even speak, you see* (*Ring and the Book*, V, 3);

*Thither he turned,—to never turn away* (*Red Cotton Night-cap Country*, IV, 22)—

these lines are improved by repairing the split. Other examples are more Gargantuan. Guido adds to his crimes by saying his four companions had a scheme

*To quietly next day at crow of cock  
Cut my own throat* (*Ring and the Book*), XI, 1741);

while Ferishtah has

*Except to—yet once more and ever again,  
Confirm thee in thy utter ignorance (A Pillar)"*

Most of these are in colloquial contexts and don't matter much, but it hurts a little to come on even so slight as snag as 'While my heart, convulsed to really speak' in the limpid flow of *By the Fire-side*. He keeps it up to the very end, sometimes with a plain air of obstinacy and defiance: *Development*, one of the last poems in *Asolando*, has one which requires a mere flick of the pen to correct—'To rightly understand mythology'. We have to forgive the weakness, as we do Keats's cockney rhymes (though I think Keats got rid of these before he wrote any of the things that matter).

And what do all these elements, good and bad, of style add up to? James Douglas said they added up to an obscurity by reason of which Browning would cease to be read before the twentieth century was out. Now this is a quite gratuitous exaggeration. The majority of Browning's shorter poems are read as easily as Tennyson's. Of the longer poems, if you keep away from those written after 1871 (i.e. after *Balaustion's Adventure*) you will not be missing very much; and your intellects are not strong if you find anything besides *Sordello* that is really difficult before that. *The Ring and the Book* is not in the least obscure, but it reads more easily if you have some acquaintance with Browning's blank-verse manner. Many people learn Italian in order to read *The Divine Comedy*: why should one not learn 'Browning', at one fiftieth of the trouble, in order to read *The Ring and the Book*? And whatever James Douglas said, it is not for those who swear by Mr T. S. Eliot to say anything of the sort, since Miss Ruth Bailey (in *A Dialogue on Modern Poetry*) has shown that it takes five grown intellectuals to worry out the 'meaning' of *Gerontion*, by no means the most difficult of Mr Eliot's poems. But Browning's obscurity is not like that of the 'modern' poets, which is deliberate and snobbish. Browning did not believe he was difficult. He was displeased with his reputation, and declined explanations (until Furnivall and the Browning Society arose to take him very seriously), and he refused to allow explanatory notes (though he had not Shaw's conceit, to object to a school edition). To some extent the abundance of his imagery offers difficulty, for an image is the opposite of the plain way of making a statement. Elizabeth said

his images were so distinct and deep-cut that they might make the general sense difficult to follow. She said also that the subtlety of his associations was an obstacle, and here of course the 'modern' poets ought to uphold him, for neither he nor they possess that 'literary tact' which a critic has said enables a writer to recognize 'an acceptable allusion—one which is common property and drenched in significance'. He is one of the poets whom T. E. Lawrence condemned as 'thought-ridden', which means he is like a bad teacher who, though full of good stuff, cannot get it across to his pupils. In *Sordello* (which I repeat stands in a class by itself) part of the difficulty lies in the constant omission of particles—*to, which, that, and*.

But the principal cause for what obscurity there is in Browning lies not in his style but in his mind. It is sometimes, as Chesterton said, that he knows so well what he means that he thinks it must be instantly clear to a reader. This is what happened with such 'puzzle poems' as *Popularity* and *Another Way of Love*, and perhaps *Nympholeptos*. All that is missing is the key-word that was in Browning's mind as he wrote. But I am afraid there are other dark passages where the trouble simply is that he did *not* know what he wanted to say: the ideas were so vague that only fog could express them. It would be a waste of time to quote—only a lengthy passage would serve—but the sixty-odd lines<sup>1</sup> in the middle of *Pauline* which I confessed to being beaten by in Chapter II are of this nature. About half Browning's work has to be read with some attention, but, read with attention, seventy-five per cent of it is as clear as Milton or Wordsworth.

## 4

There is no development of style in Browning. His artistic personality was as strong and positive as his social personality, and even in *Pauline* and *Paracelsus* the influence of Shelley and the other Romantics is slight. As soon as this was shaken off, as it was before *Pippa* was written, he came down handsomely with that human, homely, carefree and undesigned, strong and stimulating sort of diction and versification, whether blank or rhymed, which was his natural voice, and which remained unchanged to the end. If *My Last Duchess*, *Waring*, *Johannes Agricola*, *The Lost Leader*, *The Bishop's Tomb*, *Saul* and *The Flight of the Duchess* were well mixed up with *Pacchiarotto's Distemper*, *A Forgiveness*,

<sup>1</sup> 'And this I sought . . . flourish still.'

*Pan and Luna, Imperato Augusto, Never the Time and the Place, The Lady and the Painter and Muckle-Mouthed Meg*, and offered to the consideration of a critic who somehow had never come across Browning before, he would be hard put to it to say, from the style, which had been written in the first thirteen years and which in the last thirteen, with thirty years in between. If he were to turn from matters of pure style to the spirit behind the style he might feel a gayer confidence, a more brilliant touch, in some (though this would mislead in *Pacchiarotto*), and in the same way he could hardly help being aware of a deeper humanity and a pre-occupation with love in any poems from the 1855 and 1864 volumes which might have been put in among these others.

In other words, though the tools remain the same, the hand using the tools was not the same hand, but one which 'took warmth, colour, meaning from the changing heart of the poet as he had lived through the revolving and emotionally eventful world of his experience. In one way and another, there are to be distinguished seven phases in Browning's production. Period number one is that of the young man's pride—the four weighty 'works' composed between 1833 and 1840, *Pauline, Paracelsus, Strafford* and *Sordello*; the first, much underestimated, a self-portrait of lyrical beauty, the second a noble achievement lacking genius, the other two solemn failures.

Then, in 1841, creative inspiration came, and six years of the gay troubadour followed. The poems of this period are all contained in the eight volumes of *Bells and Pomegranates*, and comprise the other six plays, two volumes of short poems, and *Pippa Passes*. The last named came first, and was the first work in which the light and confident hand of genius was apparent. The two best of the plays are here, but the Browning most people know burst forth in the forty poems in the two volumes originally entitled *Dramatic Lyrics* and *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics*. Of these there are eight for immortality (to borrow Mr Richard Church's phrase)—*My Last Duchess, Artemis Prologizes, The Pied Piper, The Italian in England, The Lost Mistress, The Bishop's Tomb, The Boy and the Angel* and *Saul I*; and a number of others which should give pleasure for many years yet. Love appears in light but lovely wise in *The Lost Mistress* and *The Flower's Name*, and less perfectly elsewhere. The only signs of the coming religious absorption are in *Saul I* and *The Boy and the Angel*. All these attendant on the masterpiece, *Pippa Passes*.

Period III, from 1846 to 1864, is the period of the happy married man (many of the *Dramatis Personæ* must have been written between 1855

and 1861). Its one long poem, *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day*, is 'amphibious' and not a work of genius; it cannot equate with *Pippa Passes* (or even, æsthetically, with *Pauline* or *Paracelsus*), but it shows the strong religious interest that entered his life with his marriage. The achievement of the period lies in the sixty-nine poems contained in the original two volumes of *Men and Women* and in *Dramatis Personæ*. Of these, thirty-four are love-poems, an increase from one : four in the earlier volumes to one : two now. Moreover, it would be difficult to say that any of the earlier poems took love other than lightly or fantastically: in the poems of this third period love is life itself. Of the twenty-five love-poems in *Men and Women*, five are supreme: *By the Fire-side*, *Any Wife*, *One Word More*, *Love among the Ruins*, *In a Balcony*; five more are great and beautiful, *Evelyn Hope*, *Mesmerism*, *The Last Ride*, *In a Year*, *Two in the Campagna*; others which need not be named are full of delight. Half again of the poems of *Dramatis Personæ* are love-poems, of which *The Worst of It*, *Too Late* and *Prospice* can stand with the supreme five in *Men and Women*, with *James Lee's Wife* and *A Likeness* following close. In the young man's years, before he was thirty-four, Browning wrote only two love-poems that might belong in any of these groups, *The Lost Mistress* and *The Flower's Name*.

Besides these divine voicings of passionate love, the three volumes contain many very great poems in other categories. Religion and philosophy take first place: *Karshish*, *Cleon*, *The Heretic's Tragedy*, *Holy Cross Day*, *Blougram* and the completed *Saul*; with *A Death in the Desert* and *Caliban* (on a rather lower level) from *Dramatis Personæ*: these are religious; in the way of philosophy—*Childe Roland*, *A Grammarian's Funeral*, *Rabbi Ben Ezra* and *Sludge*; and some on literature and art.

This is wealth, indeed, and there is evidently some justification for Mr Raymond Mortimer's judgment that Browning's best work was the product of his married years. But I think we must allow that the two great poems which followed next—*The Ring and the Book* and *Balaustion's Adventure*—stand also on the peak. These are the first poems of the fourth period, the period of the great narratives (1865-75), the other five poems being great only in the sense of length. The composition of these bulky works may be supposed to have been somewhat exhausting: at all events the next period, of seven years, has the appearance of a rest, a taking it easy. The short poems—in the *Pacchiarotto* volume, the two series of *Dramatic Idyls* and the *Jocoseria*—are all in the lightweight class,

and besides them there is nothing but the translation of the *Agamemnon* and the deeply-intended but in fact rather superficial *La Saisiaz*.

The one exception to the 'light-weight' shorter poems is *A Forgiveness*, the last poem of supreme merit that Browning wrote. Immediately after it one perceives the crack, the geological fault, the downthrow. Up to this point we have never been completely absent from poems of intense interest if not of genius—the prologue and epilogue to *Fifine* (indeed *Fifine* itself), the *Mermaid*, *Fears and Scruples*, *Hervé Riel*, and now—rising sharply—*A Forgiveness*. And then with a jolt down we jump to *Cenci* and *Baldinucci*—and never really climb again except to a little hill or so in *Asolando* and the bluff headland of the *Epilogue*, standing steeply over the sea's edge. After the sixth period, the three years of sermonizing, *Asolando* makes an agreeable last chapter. Many of the poems have a genuine interest of feeling, and there are ample signs of a continued mastery of verse-form. *Asolando*, with its *Epilogue*, rounded off a life and achievement of unusual unity.

There is no doubt that the thirty years from *Pippa Passes* to *Balaustion's Adventure* cover all Browning's best work. His own statements on the question of where his best work might lie are amusingly contradictory. Quite early he declared (possibly in jest) that no poet had real genius who did not go on improving till eighty or over, and like other artists he was always inclined to think of his latest production as the best thing he had ever done: he said once that it *must* be. Yet in 1875 he put forward the interesting suggestion that a poet's collected works should be read backwards, so as to avoid the inevitable sense of a falling off. Better still, I think, avoid (except for historical purposes) the second-rate work altogether. Nobody but the painful student should read any part of a poet's work but that which represents him at his best. The *Selections* from Browning's work published in 1950 by Rupert Hart-Davis is an admirable one, but the editor found his space eaten up by the inclusion of too many poems from the *Dramatic Lyrics* and *Romances* and *Asolando* volumes. If he had reduced these and cut his *Parleyings* and *Dramatic Idyls* down to one apiece, he would have been able to include *Pippa* and *Balaustion*, and perhaps more from *The Ring and the Book*.

In 1885 Browning was asked by Edmund Gosse to name four poems of moderate length which would represent him fairly. He gave *Saul* or *Abt Vogler* (for lyrical), *A Forgiveness* (narrative), *Caliban* (dramatic), *Clive* (idyllic 'in the Greek sense'). The choice is as good as could be

expected from a poet choosing his own works, but it will be noticed that only *Saul* belongs to *Men and Women*, all the others coming from later volumes—of 1864, 1876, 1880. The narrative choice, *A Forgiveness*, is probably inevitable, but for the other classifications I think an improved selection might be made from the following: for lyric—*By the Fire-side*, *Childe Roland*, *A Grammarian's Funeral*, *The Worst of It*, *Rabbi Ben Ezra*; for dramatic—*Bishop's Tomb*, *In a Balcony*; idyllic—*Artemis Prologizes*, *Andrea del Sarto*. These cover a wider field, from 1842 to 1864.

The *Selections* in two volumes, published by Smith Elder in 1872 and 1880, are interesting as having been arranged by Browning himself, but throw little light on his preferences, since they include all the poems of the volumes published in 1842, 1845, 1855, 1864 and 1876 (with the—indeed notable—exceptions of *The Pied Piper*, *One Word More*, and the *Pucchiarotto* poem); together with the prologues and epilogues of *Fifine* and *The Two Poets of Cloisic*. With regard to the arrangement, Browning says in his introductory note to the first series that he is making no attempt to 'pronounce upon what myself may consider the best', but that he is 'stringing together certain pieces on the thread of an imaginary personality', thus presenting them 'as the natural development of a particular experience'. This arouses expectations which for me have not been satisfied. Apart from the fact that the first series ends with a group of religious and philosophical poems I have failed to discover in it any evidence of design, and the succession—*Abt Vogler*, *Two in the Campagna*, *De Gustibus*, *The Guardian Angel*, *Evelyn Hope*, *Memorabilia*, *Apparent Failure*, *Prospice* and *Childe Roland*—suggests a 'personality' much more erratic than Browning's own. The second series, though arranged even more oddly, does bear within it a marked flavour of the more pungent side of his genius. Both volumes are inexhaustible sources of treasure: beside them the mines of *Golconda* would be mere slate-quarries.

My own choice of essential Browning is as follows:

- I. All the *Men and Women* except *Up at a Villa*, *A Serenade*, *My Star*, *Instans Tyrannus*, *Love in a Life*, *Life in a Love*, *The Twins*, *Misconceptions*; and all the *Dramatis Personæ* except *Gold Hair*.
- II. *Pauline*, *Pippa Passes*, *Balaustion's Adventure* and six books of *The Ring and the Book* (Book I, *Caponsacchi*, *Pompilia*, *the Pope*, *Guido I and II*).

III. From *Dramatic Lyrics* and *Dramatic Romances*: *Cavalier Tunes I and II*, *My Last Duchess*, *Artemis Prologizes*, *Pied Piper*, *Italian in England*, *The Lost Mistress*, *the Bishop's Tomb*, *The Flower's Name*, *The Boy and the Angel*.

IV. From the later volumes: *Amphibian*, *The Householder*, *At the Mermaid*, *Fears and Scruples*, *Hervé Riel*, *A Forgiveness*, *the Epilogue*.

V (possibly). *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon*.



# *'All's over then. Does truth sound bitter?'*

## I

WHATEVER CONCLUSION we come to about Browning, it is as an artist that he has to be judged, not as a thinker. Interesting as we may find his religious and ethical views, they are of permanent value only when he has arrived at them by poetic intuition, as the vision of God's love in *Saul* or the lesson of selfless devotion to an ideal end in *A Grammarian's Funeral*. When Browning said that his work was 'less inspired' than his wife's and yet 'more important' because of its larger range he was wrong. It is more important because at its best it is more richly inspired than hers. It is not range but quality of experience that counts for poetry. The poet has got to persuade us that he has the entry to a different world from ours, and he can only persuade us of this by enabling us to share his experience. This I think he can do in three ways (though there may be more than three). There is the way of rhythmic form, used by all the greatest poets. There is the way of diction—the subtle choice and patterning of words which was Keats's way and Spenser's. And there is the way of strange thoughts, such as those found in *The Poet's Epitaph* and *Auguries of Innocence*. Browning was not clear on this: he seems to have thought it was subject that mattered. When a new Tennyson volume, *The Holy Grail and other poems*, was published Browning wrote to Isa Blagden (January 1870), '[Tennyson and I] look on the object of art in poetry so differently. . . . I should judge the conflict in the Knight's soul the proper subject to describe: Tennyson thinks he should describe the castle, the effect of the moon on its towers, anything but the soul.' And certainly Caponsacchi is a Tennysonian knight seen from inside. Yet the lines describing Lancelot's passage beneath the moonlit 'enchanted towers of Carbonek' do convey a spiritual rapture, while the unravelling of the 'conflict in the soul' of Napoleon, which Browning was effecting about the same time, conveys nothing but what we can get from Fyffe or Fisher. And this not because of the subject but the form—form as a sign that Tennyson was, as he wrote, undergoing an experience not of this world.

For, as must already be plain, the theory of art I am using is based on

the assumption that it is the function of art to introduce us to a reality to which the world of the senses and of logic bears the direct but baffling relation of a cross-section. Poetry, by which I here mean lyric, has for its principal end a mystical understanding of absolute reality, and (secondarily) the communication of this understanding. When lyric meant Herrick the emphasis was entirely on singing quality. By the nineteenth century it was admitted that what was sung should be the poet's personal feeling and thought. But lyric is not exercising its complete function unless it is interpreting for us, not by argument but by sound and movement, like music (or by some other method chosen by the poet), the reality behind phenomena. The view is not everywhere found acceptable. When, in writing about de la Mare, I ventured the assertion that 'lyric poetry is the voice of God', even my kindest critics raised their eyebrows. But does the dictum go further, save in extravagance, than Shelley when he says, 'a poet participates in the eternal, the infinite, the one', than Browning when he says, in the *Essay on Shelley*, 'The subjective poet [his name for the lyric poet] tries to see things through the eyes of God, as ultimates, specimens, of absolute truth', or even than Longinus when he speaks of 'the enthusiastic afflatus of inspired madness, filling the phrase with a sort of Delphic rapture'? More recently Signor Leone Vivante has said that 'in genuine poems there is a claim to ultimate truth', and that we can 'penetrate through poetry to the ultimate nature of reality'. He believes also that the 'inner light, an original self-acting principle, finds a high expression in English poetry': this is surely true, but Browning lies, mainly, outside the generalization. We seldom feel that his mind is obsessed by that sense of wonder that is the key to the universe. The immediate world is of such absorbing interest to him that he is blinded to a transcendent world of which the immediate one is perhaps a shadow. His vision illuminates all that we know, but does not bring light from the unknown. The focus of his awareness was almost entirely on the intensely alive world of his active sense perceptions, and he constantly makes us aware of the physical sensation that prompted a poem or an image. Now sensation can be a means to the poetic vision: Keats and Wordsworth entered the spiritual world through the doorway of the physical senses, but to them every sense perception was a miracle. Milsand might say that Browning, by showing us the outer semblance of things, made us aware of their inner significance, but the significance of which we become aware is still something of this world; it does not reveal any-

thing of the secret nature of reality. Browning's understanding of life was not, except at a few points, mystical.

His lack of a verse-form capable of conveying poetic rapture (save in one connection) was the outward sign of an inward deficiency. His life was not, except in one respect, conducive to the reception of absolute knowledge. It is widely held that suffering is a necessary preliminary to the mystic vision, but this is not altogether true. What is necessary is intensity of feeling, and this may come in the shape of either profound unhappiness or divine happiness. For a few years, from 1845 to 1855 (before illness began to close down again upon Elizabeth), Browning was indeed divinely happy, and it was this that raised his faculties to that nth degree that tunes the human spirit to the immortal harmonies. Where suffering served Tennyson, happiness served Browning, as it had served Wordsworth before him. But even when happiness failed Wordsworth, his mind enjoyed an impregnable peace which Browning never knew—which he expected only in death. His mind and life were too full of externals: he did not know 'the self-sufficing power of solitude'. So that even when he is in contact with the spiritual world of reality he is not aware of it as Wordsworth was—as Wordsworth was when doing nothing more than account for the 'naming of places'.

This is the limitation to Browning's vision to which reference was made earlier. Not everyone admits that vision of this kind is necessary to the poet, and those who do believe it necessary sometimes deny that Browning suffered the limitation I am attributing to him. W. O. Raymond calls his admirable volume of essays on Browning *The Infinite Moment*, and says in it, 'The antithesis of finite and infinite is perfect in his thought'. I might agree, without implying quite what Raymond implies. What if the antithesis were too sharp? What if it ought not to be there at all? To the poetic vision, the mystical understanding, there is no finite: what appears finite, three-dimensional appearance, is a temporal aspect of infinite reality, having itself an aspect of infinity. But Browning is insistent on the separation of 'this flexile finite life' and 'the fixed and infinite'. He bids us 'look up from the finite to infinity', instead of helping us to feel infinity round us and in us. 'Beyond thee lies the infinite—back to thy circumscription', he recommends. He condemns Sordello for 'thrusting in time eternity's concern', and the soul for attempting to 'sublime matter beyond the scheme'.

Browning is fond of the word *infinite*, and uses it three times as much

as Tennyson.<sup>1</sup> But often the word is used in its loose sense of 'very great': the 'infinitude of human passions', or the 'infinite wail' of the wind. Very many, perhaps most, of the other instances apply in the familiar way to the attributes of God—God's infinite goodness, love, power, wisdom, knowledge, justice, mercy; in his work of creation 'God tastes an infinite joy in infinite ways'. So eternity generally means heaven as contrasted with earthly life—heaven is to complete the broken arcs and eternity to 'affirm the conception of an hour' for Abt Vogler.

It is only rarely that Browning uses the words *infinite* and *eternal* (other than when referring to God) with a proper feeling for their content. As the poet of love it is right for him to speak of human love as partaking of the infinity of divine love. Though the famous 'infinite passion' that causes 'finite hearts' to yearn is, in its context, an exaggeration, since the frustrate passions of the lovers in the Campagna are not of this order, yet the finite heart is but another name for an immortal spirit which can have 'immortal longings' and know 'infinite passion', and Aprilø was right to claim to 'love infinitely'. And in a small but sufficient number of instances Browning shows that he had a genuine sense of the infinite moment, its critical occasion, its measureless content and consequence.

*O moment, one and infinite!*  
*The water slips o'er stock and stone;*  
*The west is tender, hardly bright:*  
*How still at once is the evening grown—*  
*One star,—its chrysolite!*

Words, verse and thought, with their overtones, convey perfectly the quality of that moment—the same eternal moment that held the 'one immortal look' claimed by Eurydice of Orpheus—the 'instant made eternity' that the rider dreamed for himself and his mistress. In none of these three supreme moments (except perhaps in the second) do we feel there is a clear apprehension of timelessness, or alternatively of a fully realized time; but poetry has its own lovely way of understanding what philosophy long afterwards expounds, and I am not denying Browning a mystical knowledge of the infinite moment.

In other connections too I think we perceive that he is aware of the spiritual nature of reality. When in *La Saisiaz* he climbed his hill and

<sup>1</sup> In that earth-bound work, *The Ring and the Book*, it occurs only twice, and without special significance.

came 'face to face with—Nature?—rather with Infinitude', he meant something more than an illimitable landscape. When he spoke of 'the spirit God meant should mate his with an infinite range' he had got away from the idea that immortality comes after death. When the Rabbi said that in ago 'the Right and Good and Infinite' can be 'named with knowledge absolute', 'as thou callest thy hand thy own', he was defining powers for the mind extending beyond materialism. And in a few other places he shows that with him too art, as Elizabeth said,

*pushes towards the intense significance  
Of all things, hungry for the Infinite.*

Herford says finely, 'Deeper than his Christianity, and prior to it, lay his sense of immeasurable worth in all life, the poet's passion for being'. But I feel it was not quite the passion of the true lyric poet, because the immediate source of its sense of worth was the finite life, and its remoter source a hope of another life. Moreover, his art was not such that the vital relation between form and infinity could be realized in his poetry more than rarely.

'O world, as God has made it, all is beauty.' There is no more difficult, or more profound, truth. But Browning went on from it to deduce not only love but duty, an alien notion. Browning's mind had an ethical limp that shut one of his eyes—the eye that should have been open to wonder. He was enamoured of 'truth', and sometimes forgot what William Watson called 'the rose upon truth's lips'. The line just quoted from *The Guardian Angel* is the equivalent of Keats's 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty', but Browning's use of his discovery shows that he missed its ultimate implication—that since absolute beauty is the eternal reality, only when we experience beauty do we know reality. On the other hand, love was always more important to Browning than truth, and love, Plato tells us, 'leads at last to the perception of absolute beauty'. The weakness is again apparent when we remember the Wanderer's words in *The Excursion*: 'Life is love and immortality.' To Browning life was love here, immortality coming afterwards. For him there were two worlds, for Wordsworth one. It would obviously be putting the matter too strongly to call Browning a materialist, yet it does seem that he saw the human spirit as shut in a material prison and escaping through the key-hole of death. It is the privilege of poetry to hold the door open all the time.

Browning knew that time and space are human conceptions, and once, in *Sordello*, speaks of a state of mind felt to be 'out of time', but it is not probable that he had any notion of the physics of spiritual reality described for us in Ouspensky's dimensions of time: on the whole he sees time objectively, going on and on. In the same place he says *Sordello* felt his 'flesh-half' dissolving, seeming to have in mind the false separation noticed before. Nevertheless he is right not to go so far as Mr T. S. Eliot is said to do in his later work—to show that we belong entirely to eternity and have no part in time. 'The world of appearance is not meaningless: Whitehead speaks of a tendency of sense-perception in man to conform with reality. Life may be a shadow of eternity, but the moving shadows on the wall of Plato's cave were not devoid of relevance. The philosopher who cannot join in a children's party suffers from arrested development. Man is not to be obsessed by the rainbow illusions of temporal life, but if he does not find value in their beauty and interest he will not have made full use of the experience provided: it has not been provided to be wasted. This is perhaps the inner truth of Browning's 'probation', and though he came more and more to regard life as an ante-room, yet this same life received at his hands a presentation almost unrivalled for richness, colour, variety and solidity.

Two ideas expressed in the *Shelley* essay afford further explanation of his restricted vision. He speaks there of 'the subjective poet, whose study has been himself . . . through himself to the Divine Mind'. Now it is not at all certain that this is the way Shelley's genius worked, but it does afford a clue to the nature of Browning's contact with the 'Divine Mind'. His special subject was the human soul, his own and those of his 'men and women', through which it is possible to get a valid but indirect and imperfect contact with reality. Just as Whitman's mysticism, arising from his sheer zest for life, was incomplete, so also was Browning's, coming out of his passionate interest in the soul of man rather than in the Soul that is 'the eternity of thought'. The second idea has already received consideration: he says, 'Any great achievement of genius fairly presupposes a great moral aim'. In the narrow Victorian use of the word 'moral' this is dangerous doctrine, and the achievement of genius is to hit morality by an inevitable accident while aiming at beauty. But Browning probably thought the converse of his proposition held true—that a moral aim was a sure way to great poetic achievement. He is apt to make the conflict in the souls whose development he loved to watch conform to a moral pattern, even if it were an uncon-

ventional morality of his own. Only with his loveliest women is the development a full and free flowering of the spirit in the open air of beauty.

## 2

Browning lacked the first factor in the poet's intellectual equipment, and if he had possessed it he had not at command the poetic form necessary to make it operative. And yet any critic who could read those poems which I grouped together at the end of Chapter V as 'essential Browning' without realizing that he is a very great poet indeed would be deaf, blind and stupid. The paradox is only partial, because of course the sentence with which I began this paragraph is not intended quite literally. We have seen in our survey that there are passages and poems in Browning where the mystic vision is accomplished, and where language is wrought to that strange potency we call poetic form. But these are exceptional in his work, as they are not in any poet of full stature who preceded him, and one's sense of certainty about his greatness requires other explanation.

The explanation is fourfold. In the reading of Browning's poetry we shall have become aware that we were in the presence of a writer who, in greatness of soul, power over character, and verbal affluence is second only to Shakespeare, and who in treatment of love is second to none. Of his love poetry I have said something in the appropriate chapter. Special aspects of love, approaches to love, reactions to the torments and delights of romantic love have been sung with greater power by Shakespeare, Sidney, Burns, Patmore, Hardy, Meredith, Yeats and some twentieth-century poets—de la Mare, Frost, Wolfe and (with a feeling nearer to Browning's) by Gerald Gould and Laurence Whistler. But of love between one man and one woman, an enduring and presumed eternal union, felt as a profound and serene passion, a life of life, and a mystic link with the infinite reality that is God; intimate and understanding, self-abnegating and ennobling, a faith and a philosophy and a way of life that raises two people to their impossible best: of this love Browning is the perfect lyricist, and if by the twenty-first century this kind of love shall have become extinct, a few sensitive souls will, in reading Browning, realize wistfully—as we now do about Greek nature-worship—that something precious and irreplaceable has been lost from the human scene.

I said second to Shakespeare in three other qualities. True, these qualities do not include the greatest of all, the one indispensable power that a poet must have if he is to belong to the order where Shakespeare rules *primus inter pares*: the power of form. By the power of form—in terms of language, always, and rhythm, often—Shakespeare raises life to more than human heights, so that we see it under the aspect of eternity. Browning does this so seldom that we cannot include it among his powers—it comes as an occasional gift. But there is in him a Shakespearean, a Renaissance breadth. He swam deep in life, and knew it in multiple activities—Greek, Italian, French, English, music, sculpture, travel. There is a largeness, a generosity, an abundance about the man and his work—he gives us ‘life more abundantly’. This is partly a result of the richness of his personality and mind, but equally of his opulence—again Shakespearean—of language. But once more reservation is necessary. The foaming cataract of words comes plainly from some mighty and inexhaustible source, but a cataract lacks design, obeying one blind law. Browning’s eloquence is irresistible, but it is not art: that is to say, not in the longer poems, where the force is most apparent. He is a greater master of words than any poet except Shakespeare, but his mastery is that of a man who drives a herd of buffaloes, Shakespeare’s that of a man who drives a team of horses—equally powerful, equally glorious beasts, but perfectly trained and disciplined. Browning can do most things with words, but he cannot often make them assume the form that says more than the words themselves mean; he is frequently unable to make them mean what he is trying to say; he cannot prevent two words rushing in to do the work of one (I should have said ideas there, but ideas are expressed in words); he cannot always find the right word, and will not wait for it to come. All the same, his linguistic tyranny is so majestic that Milton, Wordsworth and Tennyson are but constitutional monarchs beside him.

It is when we come to the third scene of operations, the presentation of character, that equality with Shakespeare is most nearly within sight. We have found Browning’s religious, philosophic and ethical views questionable, but he was, in truth, not concerned with abstract metaphysics or even abstract ethics: he was continuously concerned with human problems. And in the course of presenting those problems he assembled a small crowd of people of endless interest and variety. I say a ‘small’ crowd because the impression they leave on the mind is more extensive than their numbers warrant: even a rough ‘count’ shows that



the comparison with Shakespeare is rash. I calculate that Browning has something over eighty memorable characters, of whom about thirty are women. These numbers include not only principals but figures like Blougram's Gigadibs and Juan's Elvire—brought before us as Miss Ruth Draper will suggest a subsidiary personage by a glance, a word, a gesture. (On the other hand I have omitted most of the cardboard figures of the plays.) Of course more than half of Browning's production was lyric or reflective, but, quite apart from the *Sonnets*, Shakespeare also got into the plays enough lyric poetry to make two first-class lyric poets, and yet gave us between three- and four-hundred creatively distinguished men and something under a hundred living and breathing women: and this in twenty-five years compared with Browning's fifty-six. In variety and vividness Browning holds his own, and male characters like the Spanish monk, the Grammarian, Blougram and Guido, female ones like Pompilia, Constance and the wife in *Any Wife*, are not shamed by the company of Orsino and Horatius, Juliet and Brutus' Portia. Since most of the characters appear in short poems we are not often able to see them developing, but we can watch this in Paracelsus, Sordello, Caponsacchi and Léonce Miranda. There are characters, from Pippa and Balaustion to Hervé Riel and Ferishtah, to disprove Hardy's sour assertion that happy people make dull material for character-drawing. And Santayana's criticism of Browning's people that they are too realistic, not idealized into form, I must simply deny. Strongly individualized as they are (and Santayana cannot have wanted types), there is an unmistakable universal element in the knight in *Childe Roland*, the 'Last' Duke, Blougram, Guido, Karshish, and in Pippa, Balaustion, Mrs James Lee and the Queen in the Balcony. Certainly Browning stands nearer to Shakespeare in this matter of a portrait-gallery than in any other way.

Hence it is in that place where Browning's brilliant skill in character is combined with economy and grace in the management of his gargantuan vocabulary and with his supreme gift in love poetry—that is, in *Men and Women*—that we have Browning at his best. Here he grew to his complete artistic self: here, I cannot doubt, was 'R.B. a poem'. On 11th February 1845, in his fourth letter to Elizabeth, he had written, 'What I have printed gives *no* knowledge of me. . . . I never have begun, even, what I hope I was born to begin and end—"R.B. a poem"'. Elizabeth took note of this, and in his next letter he continued the theme. He would get rid of the plays and dispatch 'some Romances and Lyrics, all dramatic':

and then I shall stoop of a sudden under and out of this dancing ring of men and women hand in hand, and stand still awhile, should my eyes dazzle, and when that's over, they will be gone and you will be there, *pas vrai*? For, as I think I told you, I always shiver involuntarily when I look—no, glance—at this First Poem of mine to be. 'Now', I call it, what, upon my soul—for a solemn matter it is—what is to be done *now*, believed *now*, so far as it has been revealed to me—solemn words, truly . . .

That last sentence sounds uncommonly like Carlyle. It is odd that he should have said he wanted to get away from the 'men and women'. W. H. Griffin, perhaps with the sentence, 'you will be there, *pas vrai*?' in mind, comments: "That poem was already begun, and we may suppose he knew it." F. R. G. Duckworth, on the other hand, says Browning never did fully express himself, never did write 'R.B. a poem'. Mr J. M. Cohen finds it in the love story, and I cannot say no to this. But for myself, with the Carlylean project stated so emphatically, and the 'men and women' deliberately put aside, I am afraid that Browning regarded the first of the two productions of his marriage years, *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day*, as the poem, the 'Now', but I am very clear that the second and only other work written and published during those years, the work in which he distilled himself in a new set of 'men and women', was in fact his 'R.B. a poem'. *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* expressed—not unworthily, with its mystic vision—what he 'believed', what had been 'revealed' to him. But *Men and Women* expressed the man himself, not his mind but his profoundest soul, all the goodness and love and beauty and music that were in him, and he said so as plainly as he could:

*There they are, my fifty men and women,  
Naming me the fifty poems finished!  
Take them, Love, the book and me together:  
Where the heart lies, let the brain lie also.*

But I should like to think that he felt in his heart, and that Elizabeth told him she knew, that the essential undeniable unqualified 'R.B. a poem' was, of all the fifty, *By the Fire-side*.

whereby they would fain save themselves the task of pronouncing a critical judgment.' Thus the sage Goethe; but he has earlier exempted 'the cultured connoisseur' from the restriction, and I neither have been nor shall be afraid of the critical judgment. The comparison with Tennyson is almost inevitable: Tennyson and Browning were born to be estimated relatively to one another. I do not propose to dwell on the innumerable points of difference between the two poets, but to give my opinion that Tennyson was the greater poet because he had in high degree that mastery of form that is the pass-word to the eternal reality of beauty: we have seen that Browning was but intermittent master of the word.

I suppose I have as great an admiration for the *Epilogue to Asolando* as almost anyone, while *Crossing the Bar* is not a special favourite with me, though Hallam Tennyson told his father, 'That is the crown of your life's work', a thing that might be said with equal inconsequence about the *Epilogue*. Consider the two poems. The *Epilogue* is a beautifully ordered and nobly phrased statement of a courageous philosophy and a cheerful faith. *Crossing the Bar* is, in comparison, a sentimental trifle. But Heavens, what it does to you! The plain-song of the opening, with its clear evocative image—

*Sunset and evening star*

—and the simple rhyme-inspired metaphor, 'no moaning of the bar', developed with sudden power into one of the sublimest and most significant figures in poetry:

*such a tide as moving seems asleep,  
Too full for sound or foam,  
When that which drew from out the boundless deep  
Turns again home:*

and in the verse all the movement of the moving tide; it lifts and swings the reader body and soul, and makes him feel a thousand times more than even the great words convey. The poem fades away into commonplace and the imagery into a too particular reference, but without breaking the effect of the first two stanzas, through whose lyric form we have been transported out of time into an experience of eternal reality.

Here in an evening hymn is the thing done completely which Brown-

ing does tentatively a few times in some of his highest achievements. This supreme power of verse evinces itself in Tennyson over and over again through the 1833 and 1842 volumes, in parts of *In Memoriam*, *The Princess*, *Maud* and the *Idylls*. My standpoint has, I imagine, been made clear, but I should like to illustrate further with *The Gardener's Daughter*, a poem which is sometimes regarded as inferior to such poems as *Ulysses* and the *Morte*: 'pontifically trivial', Mr Hugh Fausset labels it. If pontifical, so likewise are *Hyperion* and the description of Eden in *Paradise Lost* IV. But a poet must not pontificate over trifles? Possibly not, though Ben Jonson does it without reproach. And perhaps courtship is a trifle. But (forgetting Mr Fausset) I suggest that in Tennyson's poem we have love and happiness and the loveliness of the world shown as a transparency through which we see eternal beauty—and this by means of poetic form.

All the land in flowery squares,  
Beneath a broad and equal-blowing wind,  
Smelt of the coming summer, as one large cloud  
Drew downward: but all else of heaven was pure  
Up to the sun, and May from verge to verge,  
And May with me from head to heel. And now,  
As though 'twere yesterday, as though it were  
The hour just flown, that morn with all its sound  
(For those old Mays had thrice the life of these)  
Rings in mine ears. The steer forgot to graze,  
And, where the hedge-row cuts the pathway, stood  
Leaning his horns into the neighbour field  
And lowing to his fellows. From the woods  
Came voices of the well-contented doves.  
The lark could scarce get out his notes for joy,  
But shook his song together as he neared  
His happy home, the ground. To left and right  
The cuckoo told his name to all the hills;  
The mellow ouzel fluted in the elm;  
The redcap whistled; and the nightingale  
Sang loud, as though he were the bird of day.

This ultimate end of poetry is achieved now and then by Browning when he is moved to the depths by love; it is a steady factor (which does

not mean that it is there all the time) with Tennyson, as it is, in varying degrees, with Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats. In all the attributes of the second class—in versatility and range of interest, in restless intellectual power, in depth, colour, force and fascination of character-presentation, and (especially) in the understanding and voicing of love—Browning is Tennyson's superior, but since Tennyson stands higher in the first requirement he must be regarded as the greater poet.

And yet how even is the balance between these two poets, exact contemporaries and good friends. *Men and Women* and *Poems in Two Volumes* 1842; *Dramatis Personæ* and *Maud*; *The Ring and the Book* and *In Memoriam*; *Pippa Passes* and *The Princess*; *Balaustion's Adventure* and the *Idylls*: if you were retiring to a 'desert island', and were offered (instead of a box of gramophone records) two volumes, one containing all the first items of these pairings, the other all the second items, and you to choose one volume—one thing is certain, that whichever of the two volumes was chosen the other would be left behind with regret. Or, confining ourselves to the first pair, *Poems in Two Volumes* and *Men and Women*, and selecting the finest poems only: on Tennyson's account there are: *The Poet*, *The Lady of Shalott*, *Ænone*, *The Palace of Art*, *The Lotos Eaters*, *A Dream of Fair Women*, *Morte D'Arthur*, *The Gardener's Daughter*, *Ulysses*, *Dora*, and five or six others; on Browning's: *Fra Lippo Lippi*, *Andrea del Sarto*, *By the Fire-side*, *Any Wife*, *Karshish*, *Childe Roland*, *The Last Ride*, *Master Hugues*, *Blougram*, *In a Balcony*, *Saul*, *A Grammarian's Funeral*, *One Word More*, and well over a dozen others of intense interest. Was ever balance more even, or choice more bewildering? It is only when both offerings are put beside a third that both are seen to shrink—a dozen poems from Wordsworth's *Poems of the Imagination*: *There was a Boy*, *To the Cuckoo*, *Nutting*, *She was a Phantom*, *Three Years She Grew*, *A Slumber did my Spirit Seal*, *Daffodils*, *Resolution and Independence*, *The Thorn*, *Hart-Leap Well*, *Tintern Abbey*, *Peter Bell*. Here is the pure diamond; the others are but emerald and ruby

## 4

To conclude (Flaubert's 'supreme ineptitude'). Browning is not a poet but a force of nature. He had no vision and no art.

(Before going on to justify these immoderate assertions I ought to remind myself that it used to be thought that Shakespeare 'wanted art'

and wrote in an 'intoxicated' state without quite knowing what he was achieving: and this about the same distance from his death as I am writing after the death of Browning: and within another half-century there set in a process, hardly completed even to-day, of discovering how little truth there was in these judgments. Objection noted: examination proceeds.)

But—'no art'? What of the brilliant art of presentation of figures and situations—Pippa passing, the Bishop ordering his tomb, the Duchess slighting her husband's 300-year-old name, del Sarto pleading with his Lucrezia, poor John of the Temple undergoing his tragedy, Hervé Riel saving the fleet, Roland on his dark road, Karshish the picker-up of learning's crumbs; or flash-lights like those of the lovers on the rain-swept Boulevard and the lady in the gas-mask clutching her phial of poison? Instances could be multiplied to prove the possession of an art nowhere excelled—but equalled by Jane Austen and the great novelists generally, by Carlyle and Macaulay. Think too of the no less brilliant art of exposition shown in Blougram, the Rabbi and the Abbé, Juan, Sludge—an art again equalled only by such masters of argument as Mill, Newman, Sidney Smith. In short, an art in both respects superb but not poetic.

I called him a force of nature. Does this in itself exclude art? Are art and nature antithetical terms? Is nature never an artist? You may look eastward over Derwentwater in the summer dusk and feel the broken emotional line, the Beardsley line, of the hills against the sky. You may see three firs on a bit of rising ground grouped, it would seem, by Croome or Cameron. The mind can be moved æsthetically, I believe, by a landscape or a face. And if we could stand back far enough from life we might see that it is not just the muddle of an artist's studio but a supreme work of art. Browning declared there was one controlling idea behind all his work. But is that enough to achieve design? Must not the hand move with the heart? I doubt whether, however far we get from Browning's work, it will ever appear as an artistic whole. We must be content again with the exquisite moulding of the shorter poems—*King Charles*, *The Lost Mistress*, *A Light Woman*, *Amphibian*; and with the organic beauty of the love-lyrics.

There may be gaps in the statement that Browning was no artist, but it remains basically true. And he was not a poet of vision. His eyes, calm as Elizabeth found them, are not those of a visionary. He saw what the common man sees. He saw it a thousand times more vividly, and pre-

sented it with unparalleled richness and warmth, but the world so presented is still the world in which we spend our sensual days. Here and there he passes beyond—to a vision of the creative process in *Paracelsus*, of the love of Christ in *Saul* and *Christmas-Eve*, of courage confronting evil in *Childe Roland*. But it is much more than 'the cloudy border of his base' that Browning 'spares to the foiled searchings of mortality'. Only in the one great exceptional region does he out-top knowledge—in love and the radiant spirit of woman: in Balaustion and Pippa, Pompilia and Caponsacchi, and in the great love-lyrics, where also he sometimes brings about a miracle of art. Love was to Browning what nature was to Wordsworth and the heavenly vision to the mystic poets. It is only in his love poetry that his philosophy achieves its full significance, and it is no accident that it occasionally does so through the medium of a perfect art-form.

For genius, the indefinable—Browning certainly had it. He was possibly the greatest genius who wrote mainly within the Victorian period. But he was born with an unspecialized genius, one that had to be directed into the field of poetry. Such unspecialized genius is undoubtedly a force of nature, with all its characteristics of creativeness, fecundity, grotesqueness, imperfection. This accounts too for Browning being, even within the chosen region, a little uncertain as to his own essential quality, whether he were land-animal or sea-animal: I have called him amphibian with special reference to a number of his poems, but the label has some significance as a description of his literary tendencies.

What have we then? A huge formless genius, a limited art, unchallenged supremacy in love poetry. There is one final thing to say about him. He was the first and greatest of the modern poets. Now this is a different kind of statement from the last one. It does not make him a poet at all. The stream of 'poetry' runs continuously on in its deep changeless traditional course through Tennyson, Arnold, the Rossettis, Swinburne, Meredith, Yeats, Thompson, Alice Meynell, Bridges, de la Mare, Davies, Flecker, Brooke, Belloc, Chesterton, Gould, Graves, Nichols, Hodgson, Thomas, Frost, Maschfield, Wolfe, Roy Campbell, Andrew Young. But Browning broke violently through the banks of this stream, and started a new line of advance. It led through Hopkins, Hardy, Housman, the later Yeats, Owen, Eliot, Palmer, Muir, Edith Sitwell, Richard Church, Ruth Pitter, Auden, Spender, Day Lewis, MacNeice, and others too numerous to mention. It has produced,

notably in Hardy, Eliot and Church, work of great interest and importance. But generally it dispenses with form, relying on epigram, it neglects the audience, and rejoices in eccentricity: as a line of advance it cannot continue to offer an alternative to traditional poetry, indeed it now shows signs of disappearing into the sand. To vary the metaphor, just as Browning was an excrescence on the tree of nineteenth-century poetry, so 'modern poetry' is an excrescence on the age-old tree of literature. Some of it has a vitality of its own, and may live on, but the greater part of the gnarled mass will wither and die. So of Browning more of him will die than of other poets. But enough of him will remain to remind the world that he was, somehow, after all, one of the chief glories of a very great period of English literature.





## A Note on Mrs Miller<sup>1</sup>

MOST OF THIS BOOK was written before the appearance of Mrs Miller's *Robert Browning: a Portrait*.

I have not modified anything of what I had written in the 'light' of her 'discoveries', but have preferred to put my dissenting views comprehensively in this note. *Amphibian* is not biographical,<sup>2</sup> but I hope the slight sketch of Browning's personality offered in Part I will do something to correct the false impressions which Mrs Miller's perverse book aimed to create.

I call the book perverse because it sets out to debunk, to denigrate, and manipulates material to that end. The denigration concerns not only Browning but his wife and the relations between them. Mrs Miller lacks what used to be, but no longer is, regarded as a necessity in a biographer, a warm sympathy with her subject. She does not like Browning, she does not like Elizabeth, and she does not approve of their marriage, and so she chooses facts, and suppresses others, with a view to making her readers share her attitude. It is not through her new material—interesting and important as this is—that she effects her purpose, but by a number of minute but significant distortions of the old, and by insinuating opinion as if it were fact.

Mrs Miller objects to Browning's having lived at home till he was thirty-four. She does not use the word 'sponging', but she writes in such a way as to lead one reviewer to say that Browning 'sponged on his father, his wife and his patron' (Mrs Miller for some reason calls Fox Browning's 'patron'). She suggests that Browning's position 'required him to work', and draws attention to the elder Browning's salary of £275 a year, neglecting to point out that this was the equivalent of to-day's income of £1000 tax free. As a comment on the situation she quotes Andrea del Sarto, 'My father and my mother died of want'. There is no evidence whatever that Browning's parents were anything but content that their gifted son should do his 'work' from his own home, and what we do know is that his 'light rational life' enabled him to produce a great bulk of poetry of a high order, which Mrs Miller would have had sacrificed to her formula of 'asserting the right of his manhood' and 'earning an honest living'.

Her feeling that parental influence played too great a part in Browning's life leads her to see the initial letters of 'Festus' and 'Michal' as standing for father and mother, but she has not much to say about Browning's father. It is Sarah Anna (as Mrs Miller always calls her) who comes under the lash. Browning's refusal to go on with the University lectures is called a 'return to his mother's side'. A totally unsupported suggestion is made that the exquisite love poem, *The Flower's Name*, 'celebrated his mother's garden and her presence among the rose-bushes'. Elvire in *Fifine at the Fair* somehow represents 'the moral standards of Sarah Anna'. Mrs Miller of course makes much of the son's exaggerated sorrow at the death of the mother in 1849, and leaves us with the impression that he never got over it: she narrates the visit to Bagni di Lucca which Elizabeth persuaded him to make soon afterwards but neglects to tell us that Elizabeth said that a few weeks of this restored his spirits. There is no evidence that Browning owed more to his mother than millions of Victorian sons owed to theirs, but Mrs Miller says, 'Sarah Anna's submerged influence magnetized the main current of his life'.

This last is the head and front of Sarah Anna's offending: she is supposed to be the changeless source of her son's religious outlook, which Mrs Miller cannot away with, regarding it as 'fundamental' Christianity, in spite of the fact that to the orthodox Mrs Orr it was hardly Christianity at all. She quotes Hardy on Browning's 'smug Christian optimism worthy of a dissenting grocer', as if Hardy's opinion on Browning's religion could matter more than Chesterton's opinion on Hardy's. She cannot believe any man would be a Christian on his own account—Browning 'adopted his mother's religion'. It was out of love for her that he 'dethroned reason'—a common enough habit of poets. There is some 'unresolved problem' of a 'double inner life', a 'tragedy' which is attributable to a 'revolt against the standards of an all-too-tenderly loved mother', an 'early betrayal' which is (most unaccountably) enshrined in the poem *Memorabilia*. No evidence is adduced to show that Browning did anything but modify, in accordance with his own strongly individual mind, the plain but not intolerant Christian teaching with which he, like most people of his generation, grew up.

But it is on the relation between Robert and Elizabeth that Mrs Miller is most iconoclastic. She is determined to shatter the legend of the perfect marriage which has provided inspiration for a hundred years of lovers. She objects bitterly to that aspect of the courtship which made Robert insist that 'there can be no love but from beneath', and especially to the apparent contradiction involved in Elizabeth's adopting a similar attitude. She calls this a 'predicament', a 'collision', a 'stalemate', and fails to see that it is simply a beautiful exchange of humility for humility, based on the fact that in a profound love each of the lovers must admire and look up to the other. She declares that the 'pedestal' on which Robert placed Elizabeth was a stumbling-block all through the fifteen years of the marriage, and yet quite unwarrantably suggests, in the middle of the marriage, that Robert was ceasing to be able to look up to his wife's intellect, and 'could no longer respect her'. This of course refers to their differences of opinion over spiritualism and Napoleon III, differences which contemporary observers assure us did not in the least affect their profounder relation. Mrs Miller sees Browning 'losing an essential dignity' through being 'silenced' on these questions: Elizabeth's letters give no impression at all of Robert's being 'silenced'—he continued to the end to be loudly and humorously critical.

Mrs Miller discovers that it was Browning's 'weakness' that made Elizabeth consent to the marriage, that the 'mastery' she desired was not forthcoming: yet any understanding study of the *Love Letters* shows Browning's steady pressure, extending over months, forcing Elizabeth to agree first to the engagement and then to a marriage fixed for the autumn of 1846, and his sudden insistence compelling her to act with incredible finality when need arose in September. There is a definite *suppressio veri* at the end of the Wimpole Street story: 'Whereupon, implacable now, Robert Browning was driven to assert over his wife the full force of his authority. "You shall think for me," he wrote, "that is my command!"' This is very witty and sarcastic, but surely it makes a difference that what Browning actually wrote was: 'I shall ask you to do no more of my business than I can manage myself, but where I can *not* manage, why then you shall think for me—that is my command.' Exactly similar is Mrs Miller's statement that in marriage Browning 'was to find "the personality of my wife . . . so strong and peculiar"' that for many years he was 'unable to assert himself in the face of it'. This is obviously intended to imply that Browning said that the strong and peculiar personality of his wife prevented him from asserting himself, but the quoted words

about her personality occur in a letter to Furnivall in 1885 simply as a reason why Browning had never felt any desire to inquire into details of Elizabeth's early life.

Mrs Miller wishes to show that Browning and his wife drifted apart through an imperfection in their love. Because Elizabeth tells Fanny Haworth she 'can conceive of a strong attachment recovering from a shock of estrangement' this is assumed to be a reference to her own marriage. When she writes to Mrs Jameson, 'I did not like Rome . . . I lost several letters in Rome, besides a good deal of illusion', we are to draw the inference that the illusion concerned Robert. We are even asked to see in Andrea del Sarto's complaint about his giddy wife's setting influence upon his art a reference to a similar obstruction in Browning's own life! No poem is 'dramatic' enough to escape being pressed into service. The wandering, wavering love of *Two in the Campagna* shows Browning 'filled with a desperate longing for the unimpaired communion of happier days'. And when Sludge protests that his soul has been ruined we are to 'hear plainly for a moment the voice of his creator' complaining that through marriage 'the burden of his message' has been 'falsified'.

I have instanced only the more obvious of the places where Mrs Miller seems to me guilty of distortion. In many others the method is more subtle, and the result is a book which—for anyone who has not a faith in Browning based on adequate knowledge—must create the impression that he was frustrated as a man and a poet owing to the influence of his mother and his wife. This I believe to be wholly untrue, both as to the frustration and the influence.





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